

Trip Report
By Emily Osborn
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"To the world you may be one person; but to one person you may be the world."

– Dr. Seuss

Day 1: Oh, the Places You'll Go!

This trip started a little differently than usual—I flew out of Detroit instead of Chicago. Expecting the usual airport chaos, I left my house at 3:30 a.m., only to find Detroit much calmer and more efficient than I was used to. Dan, my brother-in-law's father, also happened to be flying out of Detroit that morning and offered to be my airport transportation for the morning. The drive was a bit unsettling, though, as we passed a serious accident that had shut down a long stretch of I-75. Flashing lights and first responders filled the highway, and Anne later told me it was still closed as they were driving to Detroit, forcing Randy to take a detour.

Once we landed in Guatemala, Mayra and Sandra were there to welcome Anne and me with the new truck—it still had that fresh car smell! The drive to SewHope was filled with conversation, covering everything from family updates to plans for the week to the current political climate. One story that stood out was about Mayra's niece and nephew, who had returned to Guatemala out of fear of deportation. It was a sobering reminder of the challenges so many face, and it made me all the more grateful for the work SewHope is doing to create opportunities here.

By 8pm, we arrived at the hostel and unloaded our bags. TSA had inspected my checked luggage, but thankfully, all the SewHope t-shirts, laptops, and the printer made it safely! After settling in, Anne and I spent some time figuring out the new translating earbuds. They weren't exactly intuitive, but with a little practice, they might become a useful tool—especially for those of us still working on our Spanish!

With a long day of travel behind us, it felt good to finally be here. Tomorrow, the real work begins!

Day 2: The More You Read, The More You Know

The day started on a joyful note as I caught the students rehearsing *This Little Light of Mine*. Their enthusiasm was contagious—voices ringing out proudly while the teachers led them through the motions. But the best part? A few of the younger students were more focused on some serious gold-digging (of the nasal variety) than the actual song. Despite their teachers' best efforts, they remained fully committed to their task, which gave me a good laugh!

After the morning music, I continued my student interviews from last year, tracking their progress over time. We originally started with six students—three boys and three girls in either *parvulos* or first grade—hoping that even with the inevitable transitions, at least a few would stay in the program through sixth grade. This morning, I learned that three of them had already

moved on. Alba's family relocated to Colombia for a better job opportunity, but when that fell through, they moved back to Poptún. Ian's family also moved, in pursuit of better jobs. Wenderson's mother no longer wanted to deal with the long commute to bring him to school. It wasn't entirely surprising—student turnover rates in Guatemala tend to be high, with about 10% of students leaving each year. Still, I'm hopeful that at least one of the remaining three will stay with us through graduation. It will be incredible to look back on these interviews and see just how much they've grown.

Around 9 am., Julio arrived to take updated photos and capture some drone footage of the school. We chatted about photography, and he showed me a few tricks to improve my phone's camera settings—small tweaks that made a big difference! We also talked about Adobe software, and he laughed when I admitted that Premiere Pro and Photoshop still feel like a steep learning curve. There's always more to learn, but as long as I can create videos that share SewHope's mission and the impact of our work, I'll count it as a win. He's coming back tomorrow to get even more footage, especially of the clinic in action. He also jokingly promised to make Anne look as young as she wanted in Photoshop!

The late morning and afternoon were filled with tech tasks. Mayra and I set up the new printer, connecting it to WiFi for easy use. That part went smoothly. Setting up a new laptop for the Community Development team—mainly for Kenneeth—was a different story. What should have been a simple login process turned into a 30-minute saga. The system refused to recognize his Microsoft account, so we created a new one... only to be told it had to be linked to an *existing* account. Frustrated but determined, I tried the original email *one more time*—and suddenly, it worked. After three password resets, the setup was finally complete. Now, Kenneeth has access to Microsoft 365 and a brand-new Lenovo laptop. Victory!

Throughout the day, I wandered around capturing photos and videos of the students in action. Some were working diligently on RazKids and Khan Academy, while others were engaged in a lively game outside. The *parvulos* class played a game that involved one student hiding behind a tree while the others held hands, singing and chanting until they could convince the hidden student to rejoin them. After several rounds of back-and-forth, the student would jump out, chase the others, and tag the next person to hide. I had no idea what the rules were, but they were having an absolute blast!

After dinner, Anne and I sat with Mayra, Sandra, and Carmen to hear about their experience working with *The Lord's Hands and Feet* (LHF). Overall, they found it to be a good partnership, but one moment stood out as disappointing. At one home, after assessing the family's needs, an LHF member decided—based on the appearance of the house—that they *didn't* need a new stove and had the team take it back. The decision completely disregarded the socio-economic study that Sandra and Kenneeth had carefully conducted in advance. While the team had been largely wonderful to work with, this particular member's strong personality and snap judgment created an unfortunate situation. It would be a shame to lose such a valuable partnership due to one person's approach—especially since, thanks to their help, we'll be able to *double* the number of families receiving Chispa stoves this year! This issue would need to be addressed if future collaboration is to continue.

Tomorrow, I'll be heading out with Carmen and Kenneeth to visit families in Santa Ana Vieja, Centro, and San Francisco. We'll meet with women in the savings groups, including one woman who has been able to build her home piece by piece thanks to the group's support. Now, she's just one step away—she hopes to save enough to put on a roof by the end of this cycle! Capturing these stories through photos and videos will be such a great way to showcase the real impact of these programs. Typically, my time here is spent mostly on campus during *jornadas*, so getting out into the community will be a welcome change.

(Earbud update: Not great. Possibly a WiFi issue, but Anne and Sandra couldn't get them to work at all. The learning curve continues!)

Day 3: Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not.

Day 3 started with another test of the translation earbuds. Anne and I gave them a go, and—good news!—they seemed to be working. Let's just say, we won't call it "user error," but...

This morning, Kenneeth and I set out to meet families involved in the chicken project and those who have received stoves. He prepared thoughtful questions for our visits, and we were excited to hear firsthand how these initiatives are making a difference. Our first stop was Santa Ana Vieja. No matter how many times I visit, the deep level of poverty here is always striking—unfinished homes, rugged paths that barely qualify as streets, and animals and children so thin you can see their bones. Yet, amid this hardship, there is incredible resilience and hope.

Our first visit was with Doña Celestina, who greeted us warmly at her makeshift gate of bed springs, corrugated metal, and scraps. She was so proud to show off her 40 thriving chicks, part of our poultry project, and the new coop she's building. This is her first time partnering with SewHope, and her excitement was contagious. Something as simple as raising chickens and tracking her savings is already sparking a sense of possibility for her and her grandchildren.

Next, we visited Marianna. A cow skull hung at her front entrance, and her yard was alive with chickens, turkeys, and ducks. She was making coffee on her Chispa stove, and it was inspiring to see one in action—safe, efficient, and truly making a difference in daily life.

From Santa Ana Vieja, we headed to San Francisco, home to several SewHope staff members. The road between the two towns is notorious for accidents, and Kenneeth shared a recent tragic story about a head-on collision. Not exactly the thing you want to hear while navigating those same curves! But we made it safely and met with Ana Cecily and Oscar. Ana Cecily beamed as she talked about her stove and the care she takes to maintain it, even sealing the vent hole in the roof to prevent water damage.

Then, we visited Oscar. Kenneeth had told me his story on the way—his family has received support due to extreme poverty and his medical challenges. Oscar lost vision in one eye and has partial paralysis from an accident, making work difficult. Despite these hardships, he welcomed us with warmth and eagerness, proudly sharing how his Chispa stove has

transformed his family's life. Most interviews lasted a few minutes, but Oscar spoke for nearly twelve! His gratitude and attention to detail—cleaning the stove daily and deep-cleaning weekly—were truly moving. He's even considering moving his kitchen setup to a more sheltered location to make cooking easier.

On the way back, we had to slow down for countless fearless (or just exhausted) dogs lounging in the road. I joked that they were the bravest dogs I'd ever seen, and Kenneeth laughed, saying, "Brave or just very tired." We chatted the whole way back—about the differences between Toledo and here, the tools we use to learn languages, and even the vibrant cemeteries of Guatemala compared to the monochrome ones back home. (Seriously, why are our cemeteries so dull? The ones here feel alive!)

Back at SewHope, Kenneeth showed me the progress on the school's door painting project. He and Everson have been sanding, patching, and painting, but the process is slower than expected due to drying times and unpredictable weather. Still, the finished doors look fantastic!

After a quick recharge (both my phone and myself), I met with Carmen to go over the budget and clarify expense categories. Then it was lunchtime—Anne actually beat me there today! She remembered to take a break! We caught up on the latest political news and discussed Rubio's conversation with the Guatemalan president before joining Mayra and Julio to tackle internet issues. With students, clinic staff, and cameras all competing for bandwidth, our current provider, Claro, isn't cutting it. Julio reached out to them for solutions, but Starlink might be our next step.

At 2 pm, Kenneeth and I set off again, this time to Santa Ana Centro, just around the corner from SewHope. We interviewed another stove recipient, a mother whose children attend our school. On our way, we passed students in their bright yellow-green P.E. jackets—easily spotted among the dusty roads. It was a quick visit before heading back for another round of interviews, this time with the teachers. Seiner and Carmen helped translate, and we managed to interview almost all of them. Seiner was the only one to escape his fate today. Eventually, I hope to get everyone on camera, but some staff members are proving tricky to catch. (We'll get them, one way or another!)

Carmen suddenly remembered that the savings group was meeting, so we made a last-minute trip back to Santa Ana Centro. The meeting was at V's home, where she has been building a better house for her family—one phase at a time, thanks to her savings. She's nearly done, with a roof and flooring next on her list. Each woman in the group shared how saving has changed her life—whether for medical expenses, transportation, or building a better future for their children. The gratitude in the room was overwhelming. Meanwhile, a determined little kitten made repeated attempts to stow away in my backpack, only to be redirected each time. Eventually, he shifted his focus to stalking a chicken.

By the time we returned to SewHope, my phone battery had finally given up. I took a moment to unwind, respond to messages, and read before working with Anne to prep for tomorrow's board

meeting. She's hoping it will only last an hour. I've never been to a Guatemalan board meeting shorter than two hours, so let's just say I have my doubts—but here's hoping!

Day 4: Oh, the Thinks You Can Think!

This morning started with a long-awaited meeting—Tita and Lucky arrived at 7 a.m.! After four years of Zoom calls and virtual conversations, it was amazing to finally meet them in person. I made my way to the kitchen for some breakfast and found them there, already getting their coffee and preparing for the day. Apparently, peanut butter on toast is a very American thing, and my breakfast choice became an unexpected conversation starter!

Before the official meeting, we ran through the agenda together and tackled some lingering questions, hoping to make the board meeting as efficient as possible. One of the main topics was the end-of-contract payments, a recurring point of confusion. Do we pay severance at the end of the year? What happens if we move employees to indefinite contracts and then face financial strain? Lucky recommended keeping funds loosely restricted for this purpose, as we've done in the past, while Mayra prefers the annual contract model. Tita suggested adding clear contract language specifying that severance isn't paid if an employee resigns, ensuring legal clarity. These are complex decisions, but everyone agreed that being proactive would help us navigate them better.

At 9am, the board meeting officially began. We were joined by key staff—Mayra, Seiner, Kenneeth, and Carmen—so their insights could be incorporated into the discussion. Dr. Palma had some exciting suggestions about potential Rotary Global Grants, including the idea of a mobile clinic. This could be a game-changer, allowing us to provide on-site biopsies and treatments in remote villages where transportation to SewHope is a major challenge. While construction projects don't qualify for the Global Grant, there's plenty of opportunity to develop a strong proposal for a different program. Dr. Palma shared insights from his experience with Rotary, emphasizing the importance of accountability and strong project management. It's encouraging to know that despite past challenges, the club has successfully facilitated several large global grants—something we can learn from as we move forward.

Another big discussion centered on the need for a Local Director to oversee projects and manage staff. Everyone agreed this is a crucial next step. Our goal this year is to craft a clear job description, outline expectations, and begin the search for the right candidate. LinkedIn is a popular recruitment tool in Guatemala, and staff had great input on the qualities this person should have.

Throughout the meeting, I used my translation earbuds to keep up with the conversation. They worked surprisingly well—except when multiple people spoke at once or when Anne spoke Spanish, which the earbuds insisted on translating as if she were speaking English, resulting in some hilarious (and very incorrect) Spanish phrases! Eventually, the earbuds ran out of battery, leaving me to rely on my own language skills. After hours of discussion, my brain felt slower by the minute—by the end, even English was starting to feel like a second language!

At noon, we wrapped up. Was it because we had thoroughly covered the agenda, or because the smell of Doña Ana's cooking was too good to resist? The world may never know. Anne's dream of a one-hour meeting was long gone, and my expectation of a lengthy discussion was fully met.

Lunch was a lively gathering, with eleven of us crowded around the table, sharing delicious food and hibiscus juice. Conversations flowed in Spanish and English, overlapping in the best way. Since Dana had just arrived the night before, we took her on a campus tour after lunch. Seiner opened some classrooms to show us recent projects, including a fourth-grade geography assignment with hand-drawn maps of Central America. This was the moment we all realized how questionable our geography skills were—we definitely learned something new!

Then Anne spoke the magic words: "Ice cream?" In a matter of minutes, eleven of us were piled into the van, heading into Santa Ana Centro for a sweet treat at Sarita. Guatemala never ceases to surprise me—apparently, sweet corn ice cream is a thing! (Tita strongly advised against trying it.)

After ice cream, most of the staff headed home, while Mayra and Sandra stayed behind to prepare for tomorrow's clinic. Back at the hostel, Tita, Lucky, Anne, Dana, and I sat together in the common area, letting the conversation flow from AI and virtual reality to Guatemalan tourism (did you know Guatemala welcomed about 4 million foreign visitors last year?!) and social media trends. It was the perfect way to wind down before Tita and Lucky left for the airport.

By the end of the day, I was officially out of words—English, Spanish, and everything in between. But days like this remind me why I love being here. The conversations, the collaborations, and the vision we share for SewHope's future make every discussion, no matter how long, completely worthwhile.

Day 5: Think and wonder, wonder and think

Compared to the hustle and bustle of the clinic, today was a quieter one for me—but not without plenty of deep thinking and problem-solving! While Dana and Anne jumped into another full day at the clinic, I settled in with the Guatemalan Labor Code, determined to untangle the complexities of staff contracts and severance pay. And let me tell you—after reading *a lot* of legal text, I think I finally cracked the code on *indemnization*. I compiled my notes into a clear summary and shared them with Anne so we could chart the best path forward for this year's contracts.

With that squared away, I shifted gears to organizing my notes from yesterday's board meeting—deciphering my own chicken scratch, filling in details, and following new threads of research. One rabbit hole led to another: mobile clinics, upfront and long-term costs, how to make healthcare more accessible. Then I started thinking about the unreliable internet and how a dedicated WiFi hotspot could be a game-changer for *jornadas*. Right now, Mayra uses her personal hotspot and data to update patient records in the field—surely there's a better solution.

One idea led to another, and before I knew it, the afternoon had slipped away in a flurry of problem-solving and planning.

But the highlight of the day was getting to interview more of our incredible staff. Carmen, Mayra, and Sandra graciously shared their stories, and each one was powerful. Mayra was so moved while talking about SewHope's impact that she broke down in tears. Carmen spoke passionately about the women's groups and how learning to save money and raise chickens has been transformational for so many families. Sandra, who works across all programs as our social worker, said that while she loves every part of her job, her heart is in health—because there, you see immediate, life-saving change. Their words left me inspired and excited to edit these interviews into something meaningful for LEAP and other campaigns throughout the year. I can't wait to hear these stories again, maybe catching even more the second time around.

As the workday wrapped up, Anne, Dana, and I were chatting in the hostel common space when we got a surprise visit from Mayra's family. Little Emma, with her chubby cheeks and bright smile, was brave enough to give Anne a hug. Melanie, her big sister, greeted us all, and then in walked Mayra's niece and nephew, who are here from Nebraska. They left the rest of their family behind in Nebraska, having left the U.S. out of fear, hoping to return in time for the next school year. I couldn't help but think about how the growing divide, the battle between us and "them," is leading the US towards a path all too familiar and devastating. It's good to remember that while our work is rooted in Guatemala, the impact of systems, policies, and decisions stretches far beyond borders.

Some days are about action, others about reflection—and today felt like a bit of both.

Day 6: Sometimes the questions are complicated and the answers are simple

The morning kicked off with more interviews. Marcelo had just finished his overnight security shift, and Diego was arriving to start his workday, so I was able to catch them both before they got too busy. (Huge thanks to Carmen for tracking them down for me!) I had almost forgotten that the overnight security shifts are divided differently at the beginning of the year since Guillermo, Diego, and Milton take their vacation days after the holiday season. Since they work through December while everyone else is off, their time off happens now. Milton is on duty tonight, so I'm hoping to get his interview done at the start of his shift.

Today was mostly an administrative day. I spent some time at the school taking photos and then set up a Google Sheet for patient receipts and test results—one that can actually be used without an internet connection. Unlike the current file, which is too large to work offline, this version will require manual data entry, but at least it won't glitch out in low-connectivity areas. I continued updating files, only to crash my computer twice while trying to upload photos and videos to the drive. Lesson learned: slow upload speeds and large files are not a good mix. Julio sent me some fantastic photos from earlier in the week, and having learned from my mistakes, I won't even attempt to upload them until I have high-speed internet again.

By mid-afternoon, I caught up with Kenneeth for his interview and then headed back to the school to check if Seiner had returned from his meeting with the Ministry of Education in Flores. His meeting was supposed to wrap up by noon, but when I had checked earlier, Katty told me he was still there. Luckily, by 3:30, he was back, and I was able to sit down with him. Guillermo, one of the security guards currently on vacation, also stopped by so I could talk with him. Finally, last but not least, Milton sat down with me for the final staff interview! At this point in the week, my Spanish skills have definitely peaked and are now in steady decline—I swear, by Milton’s interview, I was catching maybe every tenth word.

Later in the evening, Anne, Mayra, Sandra, Dana, and I had a Zoom call with WINGS, an organization that provides reproductive health education and services to underserved, primarily rural communities in Guatemala. They’re planning to open their first clinic in Petén, in San Benito, this July. Their plan is to work two days a week in the clinic and spend two days out in the communities doing *jornadas*. Up until now, their services have focused on other regions of the country, but they’re interested in collaborating with us for outreach and potentially other projects.

After the call, Anne seemed a bit skeptical about their approach, particularly regarding how they treat and prevent cervical cancer. She wasn’t convinced by their methods, but if they were open to performing pap smears instead of VIA and sending their slides to us, it could be worth considering. Even better would be training their health promoters and staff on how to properly conduct paps. But is this a collaboration we want—or should—move forward with? That’s the big question.

For now, it’s another thing to think about.

Day 7: You're Off to Great Places!

The health team was out the door and on the road to Poptún before the sun even thought about rising. I stayed behind, knowing I had one last full day to tie up loose ends before my own early morning departure. As I was getting ready for the day, I got an alert about potential flight delays due to weather in Detroit. Not exactly the best news, but at this point, it was out of my hands. Whatever happens, happens.

I dove into the final stretch of work, tackling the pages handwritten notes from the week. What started as a collection of barely legible chicken scratch slowly transformed into neatly typed, coherent documentation. It was satisfying to see everything come together—each meeting, discussion, and decision laid out clearly. I attempted to transcribe and translate one of the interviews, but the slow internet turned it into an exercise in patience. After multiple buffering-induced sighs, I decided it was best saved for a stronger WiFi connection.

I sorted through the t-shirts I brought from the States, making sure every volunteer, staff member, and extra set of hands got theirs. Thankfully, handing them out throughout the week saved me some time, so all that was left was matching Cecilia’s list with the remaining shirts for those arriving after I leave.

Packing was its own little puzzle. Somehow, I managed to fit all my belongings back into my suitcase, along with the biopsies I'm bringing back for Anne. Hopefully, ProPath will have the results ready before she leaves in a week or so. It's not every day you get to casually transport medical samples, but here we are.

After lunch, I switched gears to something equally tedious but necessary—preparing the End of Year tax statements. The goal is to have them out by the end of the month, and while it's not the most thrilling task, it's a crucial one. Numbers, names, donations—everything needed to be double-checked and perfectly formatted. I worked on it for a few hours before finally calling it a day. You can only do so many before you go crossed-eyed staring at the all of the numbers.

With the hostel quiet and the only soundtrack being the chirping birds, I took a moment to just sit and soak it all in. The warmth of the Guatemalan air, the rustling of the trees, the peacefulness of the afternoon—it was the complete opposite of what awaited me back home. Soon, I'll be trading this for cold, wintry weather and the inevitable post-travel exhaustion. But for now, I'm going to let myself enjoy the warmth just a little longer.

Day 8: Trains and Planes and Jackknifed Semis

While the health team headed off for another jornada—this time an overnight near El Naranjo—I embarked on my own adventure: The Great Migration Home. Marcelo, my early morning chauffeur, picked me up at 6:00 AM, and off to Flores we went. I said goodbye to Guatemala and braced myself for a long day of planes, airports, and questionable airline snacks.

The first leg? Easy. Flores to Guatemala City was a breeze. Guatemala City to Miami? Smooth as could be. Miami to Detroit? No complaints—except that the temperature seemed to drop several degrees every time I stepped off a plane. And then there was Detroit.

I knew I was in trouble the moment I stepped outside and the air physically *hurt* my face. A logical person might have booked a hotel for the night and figured out a way back to Toledo in the morning, but my trusty brother-in-law, Nick, was already on his way. “The roads aren't that bad,” he assured me. HA! Famous. Last. Words.

First challenge: getting out of the airport. Visibility was so bad we could barely see the road signs, and in our confusion (I won't say whose fault it was, but let's just say *I* wasn't driving), we missed the ramp and took an extra lap around the airport before finally escaping its icy clutches.

Then came the second challenge: Nick casually mentioned that a semi-truck had jackknifed on his way to pick me up. “But it was moving again, so we should be fine.” Ah, such optimism. Such misplaced hope.

Twenty-five minutes later, we were at a complete standstill. That same semi? Still very much jackknifed. Still very much blocking every lane of traffic. So there we sat. And sat. And sat some more. One hour passed. Then two. Then two and a half. At some point, I started questioning my

life choices. Nick, in his infinite patience, seemed prepared to spend the night on the highway. I, however, was not.

After watching at least a dozen cars and semis take their chances with an illegal U-turn using the emergency vehicle cut-through, I decided it was time to embrace the lawless spirit of the Midwest and convince my very much law-abiding brother-in-law to join their ranks. With 15% battery left on my phone and zero interest in spending the night parked behind a semi, I became the reluctant navigator of a backroad detour through Monroe.

Finally—*finally*—after *three and a half hours* of what should have been a one-hour drive, Nick dropped me off at my house. He had just enough time to squeeze in a power nap before heading off to work. I, on the other hand, collapsed into my bed, grateful to be home, and even more grateful that I wouldn't have to set foot in an airport for a while.

Final Thoughts:

As I sit back and reflect on this trip, one thought stands out above all else: the people of SewHope are truly remarkable. From the dedicated staff to the families whose lives have been impacted, every single person I encountered embodied a spirit of resilience, passion, and commitment.

The staff—where do I even begin? They work tirelessly, pouring their hearts into every aspect of the organization, ensuring that SewHope continues to grow and serve the community. Whether it was the health team heading out before dawn for *jornadas*, the teachers inspiring young minds, or our social worker, Sandra, empowering families, everyone approached their work with an unwavering sense of purpose. Seeing their dedication first hand made me appreciate the depth of their impact even more. They don't just do their jobs—they *believe* in what they do, and that belief is contagious.

And then there are the families. Sitting down with them, hearing their stories, and seeing their pride in being part of SewHope's programs was humbling. Whether it was women learning to save and start their own businesses, students singing loud and proud, or patients receiving life-saving care, the pride they carried was undeniable. SewHope isn't just an organization to them—it's a community, a support system, a source of hope.

For me, this trip was more than just meetings and interviews. It was a much-needed recharge. The warmth of the people, the energy of the mission, and even the unpredictable travel adventures reminded me why I love being part of this work. I laughed a lot, learned a lot, and left feeling more inspired than ever. Yes, the to-do list is still long, maybe longer than before I arrived, and there are always challenges to navigate, but if there's one thing this trip made clear, it's that SewHope is in the hands of some truly incredible people.

As Dr. Seuss might say, *"You're off to great places! Today is your day! Your mountain is waiting, so get on your way!"* And with a team like this, I have no doubt that SewHope will keep climbing to new heights.