

Y student puts money where heart is - in Guatemala

By Julia Burgon *NewsNet Staff Writer* - 12 Jun 2003

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Jason Gardner, center, with father Reed, left, in Guatemala.

For some students, the BYU motto "Enter to Learn, Go Forth to Serve" is merely a sign at the entrance to campus. For other students it is a lifestyle.

After interning in Guatemala last summer with Help International, a Provo-based volunteer organization, Jason Gardner, a senior at BYU from Farmington, decided to organize his own humanitarian project.

Gardner originally served his mission in Guatemala, which was the inspiration to work with Help International in Guatemala, he said.

"Since he went on his mission there he's had such a love for the people and it's been neat to see him want to go back and do something productive to help them and help their way of life," Gardner's mother, Cindy Gardner.

Together with other organizations based in Guatemala, Help International worked with several different communities. The volunteers taught the people new skills to improve the nutrition in their communities. They instructed them on different techniques to grow vegetables and plants.

"I had a great experience and really enjoyed it," Gardner said. "I would recommend working with Help International."

While Gardner was in Guatemala last summer, he saw several projects he was interested in doing on his own, he said.

"I wanted to take a new direction," he said. "And I thought it would be a good experience."

Originally Gardner wanted to start his own organization, he said. A number of people had offered to

assist him, but ultimately he was advised to find an alternative way to gather donations.

"I was getting myself into more then I thought, and it was really something I had to think over," Gardner said.

Through a family friend, Gardner was put in contact with the International Cultural Exchange Foundation, an organization that works on a variety of different projects.

"The founder was really excited because when he initially set up his foundation, these were the types of projects he really wanted to do," Gardner said.

Over Memorial Day weekend, Gardner and his father, Reed Gardner, took a trip to Guatemala to meet with a number of different schools and communities who were hoping for assistance.

"They took us out to these schools, and there are so many needs," Reed Gardner said. "Here we have everything we need at our fingertips, and they have virtually nothing."

After meeting with six different groups, Jason Gardner selected three projects.

"We selected certain projects because we did not want to just hand over some money," Jason Gardner said. "We wanted to help communities that would continue to help themselves. We chose projects that would be perpetual."

In the village of Tioxya, Jason Gardner will be assisting in the construction of three large fresh water fish tanks.

Last year the Tioxya community raised enough money to build one fish tank. Every four months they take the fish they raise to sell at the market. With the money they earn they plan to save and build a school. The addition of the three new tanks, which Jason Gardner will fund and help build, will allow the community to go to the market once a month.

"They didn't say give us a school," Reed Gardner said. "They said help us build another fish tank so that we raise more fish, so that we can build the school, and we can supply the kids with the needs to be educated. I really was impressed with that."

Jason Gardner's second project was chosen after meeting with children of various communities and assessing their requests.

"Working with the children I saw all the needs first hand," Jason Gardner said. "I saw how the majority of the children don't have the basic needs as far as materials go."

Students lacked backpacks, desks, books and other basic supplies, all of which Jason Gardner hopes to gather and present to seven different communities.

Cindy Gardner is assisting her son by collecting used backpacks from local elementary schools. Students are encouraged to donate their backpack, with permission from their parents, on the last day

of the school year.

"It's been really fun because the kids have responded by donating their old backpacks," Cindy Gardner said. "So far we have collected about 70 backpacks."

Family members and friends are also working to collect backpacks at different schools throughout Utah and in Arizona.

Plans have also been arranged to provide computers to several schools, which will be donated by a family friend who owns a computer store.

The third project Jason Gardner plans to execute is to assist a community purchase a piece of land where they hope to build a new school. Currently the children attend class in a three-room school made of bamboo walls and a metal roof. They have logs cut in half to use as desk tops and sit on the dirt floors, Reed Gardner said.

Jason Gardner did not purchase the half acre lot in full, but set up a program to help support them in purchasing the land so their payments can be made on time.

"It was only \$780 of our money, but to them it's millions," Reed Gardner said.

In order to complete the three projects, Jason Gardner expects to raise \$20,000. Donations have already been received from organizations and family members.

"I've already passed the halfway point in donations," Jason Gardner said after being informed recently that his donations totaled \$12,000.

Jason Gardner plans to collect the remaining \$8,000 from companies and individuals who are interested and willing to help.

"As a parent it is really neat to see when your kid steps up and takes over and really starts to show what they can do," Reed Gardner said. "I was really impressed and really proud to see him take that role."

Throughout the summer, Jason Gardner will be sending funds to help the communities start on their projects.

Plans are already in place for Jason Gardner, along with family members and close friends, to return to Guatemala for two weeks in August.

"We will take a lot of the materials we gather with us," Jason Gardner said. "We'll meet with the different communities and finish up all the projects."

He said is thankful to those who are helping through material donations, financial assistance and giving of their time to aid the communities in Guatemala.

"Their life is hard and I think he [Jason Gardner] sees those needs that can improve the quality of their life yet still keep their culture," Cindy Gardner said. "It means a lot to me to see him do that just because I know how much he cares about the people."

He will be collecting donations to fund his projects through August 10. Materials and/or money can be sent to ICEF c/o Jason Gardner, 2096 North Summerwood Drive Farmington, Utah 84025.