

**SOPHIA'S CIRCLE
& LAS CRUCES-CHIAPAS CONNECTION**

455 W. Ethel Ave., Las Cruces, NM 88005

Dear Friends:

We write with best wishes for 2009 and a brief update on our activities over the past year. Sophia's Circle is a 501(c) (3) women's art and cultural organization and Las Cruces-Chiapas Connection (LCCC) is its main project. LCCC members assist women and their families in two weaving and embroidery cooperatives in highland Chiapas, Mexico -- *Tsobol Antzetik* (Women United) in San Pedro Chenalhó and a group of teachers in autonomous Zapatista schools -- to sell their weavings through fair trade. We are proud to share with you the fruits of our labor and plans for the future.

UPDATE ON THE COOPERATIVES

The following is from Christine Eber, LCCC Advisory Circle member and New Mexico State University Anthropology professor, who visited members of *Tsobol Antzetik* in February and March 2009:

"Every time I visit families in Chenalhó I am struck by how hard their lives are but how much energy they gain from their collective work. I was reminded of life's difficulties while spending time with Zenaida Pérez Pérez, one of the younger members of Tsobol Antzetik. During the days leading up to a weaving competition on March 5th, I watched Zenaida weave and take care of household chores and Josue, her toddler. I marveled at how she went back and forth between weaving, nursing Josue, washing clothes, and preparing food for her husband and parents who were harvesting coffee. Selling coffee and weavings are the major sources of cash for families in Chenalhó to buy what they cannot produce. Increasingly, families cannot produce all the corn they need; after buying corn, few families have enough money to buy beans on a daily basis. Water is still not easily accessible to many families. Women must walk to distant water holes and during the dry season to the river, which for most women is a long walk down a steep mountain. Washing weavings for sale is arduous.

It takes a lot of courage not to give into these conditions and accept government handouts. Zenaida and other members of the two co-ops maintain that to stand up for social justice, they must refuse government hand-outs in the form of food, tin roofs, cement floors, water systems, and cash allotments. They maintain that the government uses handouts to buy poor people's votes and to create divisions between those who work collectively for social justice and those who depend on the government's charity. Rather than participate in the government's paternalistic development projects, Tsobol Antzetik and the teachers' co-op are committed to creating economies of solidarity with others in their townships and supporters of fair trade and social justice in other parts of the world, such as LCCC.



On the day of the competition I was delighted when Zenaida won 1st prize for a wall-hanging with rows of chickens. Everyone, including the children, won a prize that day. The celebration gave the women a break from their household work and a chance to celebrate each others' accomplishments.

Bill Jungels, LCCC supporter from Buffalo, attended the weaving competition with Christine and took the picture on the previous page and a film clip which is posted at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvL706Dmff0>. We hope you enjoy this clip as well as additional ones of life in highland Chiapas that Christine took:

A ritual during Carnival - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0ErOBib0Rg>

Choir rehearsal in a Catholic chapel - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEi8maCn9y0>

Making tortillas in the morning: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUvp6EC2efY&fmt=18>

Weaving and daily life: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=990w6JjRjPc&fmt=18>

WEAVING SALES:

In 2008 LCCC members sent \$12,830 to the two cooperatives from weaving sales proceeds. We are deeply grateful to the following organizations, businesses and individuals in our border region for donating their spaces for our events: NMSU University Museum, Las Cruces; Spirits Winds Gift and Coffee shop, Las Cruces; Virati Center, Las Cruces; Earth Day Coalition, Las Cruces; Border Book Festival, Mesilla, New Mexico; Cultural Center of Mesilla; Judy Forney's and Kelly Siebe's homes, Las Cruces; El Colectivo Escúchame Rugir & Peace and Justice Center, Albuquerque, New Mexico; Mercado Mayapán, Day of the Dead celebration, El Paso, Texas; St. Patrick's Cathedral in El Paso, and the U.S. Consulate Holiday sale, Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.

If you would like to organize a sale in your home or with your group or organization, please contact our sales coordinator, Julie Rice at ja_rice@nmsu.edu. Julie is a Sociology Professor at NMSU conducting research on fair trade from feminist perspectives. Look for Julie and her students at future sales asking for your ideas about fair trade. Also, Advisory Circle member, Til Zimmerman, is exploring how we can sell fair trade coffee from Chiapas through Just Coffee. We also look forward to joining forces for future sales with parishioners at St. Patrick's cathedral who visited Chiapas in Fall 2008.

SCHOLARSHIPS

For the past three years, LCCC member donations have partially supported Claudia Pérez Pérez and Juventina Arias Pérez of Chenalhó to attend middle school and high school. Claudia and Juventina are unusual among young Maya women in their township where half of women and girls have not attended primary school. With annual household incomes often less than \$1,000, parents cannot afford to pay school expenses which include transportation, books, uniforms, and sometimes room and board. Although public education is "free," one year of middle and high school ranges from \$800-\$1,000.



Christine Eber and Juventina Arias Pérez



Claudia Pérez Pérez

LCCC is currently raising funds for one more installment of \$180 each for Claudia and Juventina to finish the 2008-2009 school year which we will send in early May 2009. We are delighted to announce that in August 2009 The Maya Educational Foundation (MEF) of South Woodstock, Vermont will take over providing Claudia's & Juventina's scholarships under a program that Christine Eber recently established. The Woodrow Jennings Eber Memorial Scholarship Fund honors her late father, a former Accounting Professor at Central Michigan University. As of August the program will provide scholarships for four young people in middle school and high school, including Claudia and Juventina. For information about how you can contribute to this and other scholarship programs for Maya young people in Chiapas, Guatemala and Belize, please see MEF's website at: www.mayaedufound.org

LCCC WEB SITE AND MEMBERSHIP:

Please visit our website and become a member - <http://www.lascruceschiapasconnection.com>. At this time, on our web site you can learn about the weavers' work and lives, become a member and also purchase pen and ink notecards in honor of Maya women. Please keep checking for new additions to the site!

Proceeds from memberships and notecard sales help fund our support work for the weaving cooperatives. With your membership you will receive a 10% discount on all sales, an annual newsletter, and email updates on our work and sales. With the following memberships you will also receive: 1) \$15 Budget membership - six notecards and envelop; 2) 35\$ Basic membership - 6 notecards and envelops and a woven bookmark; 3) \$100 Gold membership - 12 notecards and envelops and our gift of a weaving. Memberships are good for one year and can be mailed to the address on the form below.

Warmest regards,

Sophia's Circle Board members & the Las Cruces Chiapas Connection Advisory Circle

Melissa Copeland Christine Eber Judy Forney Jean McDonnell Sally Meisenhelder
Julie Steinkopf Rice Rebecca Wiggins Til Zimmerman

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YES! I want to support Las Cruces Chiapas Connection in its work on behalf of weaving cooperatives in Chiapas, Mexico. Enclosed is my check payable to Sophia's Circle in the amount of US \$

_____.
Please mail your form to: Sophia's Circle, 455 W. Ethel Ave., Las Cruces, NM 88005
Membership (circle one) Budget membership _____ Basic Membership _____ Gold membership _____
Name: _____
Address: _____
Phone: _____ email: _____

(If you would like to make an additional donation toward the last LCCC installment of Claudia's & Juventina's scholarships - \$180/student -please note that amount here _____.)

Thank you for your gift!!