

# COMMUNITY

## Growing Voices in Mexico: Finding Art, Community, and Support on both sides of the border

by Chelsea Wills

Tzucacab is a small town nestled in the jungle of southern Yucatan, Mexico. People have been living in this town for the last 5000 years. They have been waking early to walk to their milpas to grow their corn, care for their animals. Tranquilo is how people describe Yucatan, which means tranquil, slow, mellow. It means time to be with your family and community. It means having enough but not too much. It means long hours in the hammock in the afternoon telling stories. Life in Tzucacab is also hard. Subsistence farming is real work done in the hot sun of the tropics, complete with bugs, plant diseases, and droughts. It is a work of patience, great knowledge, and faith.

In January of this year Devon and I set off to live in a nearby city and work with this community of people on food sovereignty and biodiversity. We showed up ready to be fascinated by the food, the Mayan language, and the plants of the tropics. So first we ate Cochinita Pibil, the slow-baked suckling pig marinated in achiote and bitter orange with the softest freshest tortillas imaginable. We sat with the fruit seller and sucked on mangos while she taught us the names for all the fruits in her stand in Mayan. We walked through gardens asking, "Que es eso?" (what is that?) about everything growing. Throughout these experiences, something happened and we became enchanted with this

place.

All of this as we worked to prepare for a group of 18 University of California students to come stay in the village for a week. Each student stayed with a homestay family for 7 days as part of an alternative spring break trip aimed at intercultural exchange. With the arrival of the students, what began as a whisper of thought turned into a roar. The generosity of the families receiving the students (and the students receiving the families) was incredible. As a community artist, watching these new relationships unfold between not only students and families but the friendships between the families involved, I was moved at how creative each person found themselves in this unfolding.

Once the students left it was time to focus on our larger work with the community about food sovereignty and biodiversity. For the next months we would be working with a group of young adults trying to find out more about how people have sovereignty over their food. This project includes surveying plots where people grow food as well as using photos and stories to understand the knowledge of how people produce food. We applied for grants to fund our project, a collaboration between the arts and sciences. Finding a grant to fit our unusual blend of art and science, and of community organizing and research proved difficult. It became clear quickly that in order to maintain the vision of the project we would need to find

money somewhere else. After many conversations reflecting on generosity, we realized the place we felt most generous and supported by generosity were in our communities.

With the great arm of the economy impacting the lives of everyone we know (on both sides of border) asking for funding was delicate. Of course we needed money to fund our project but accidentally we had stumbled upon an even greater opportunity, one in which our community could participate in something inspiring and innovative and be recognized for it. In order to do this we used the website Kickstarter.com to ask for the support of our community. By using Kickstarter any size gift could be accepted.

As the donations poured in from old and new friends, family, coworkers, we realized how much support we had for this project. More than 70 donors are making it possible financially. We love that our project based in the community of Tzucacab is made possible by our communities of friends and family.

In Tzucacab, after the group of spring break students left, I was surprised at overwhelming kindness and generosity people would show us. I remember seeing one grandmother grinning her gold-tooth smile at me when it hit me that probably her family had housed a student. She wanted me to see her as much she wanted to see me because in that moment we had an opportunity to see each other as generous. Both with our community of supporters on kickstarter and in our daily work in Tzucacab we have the chance to see one another in our best light.

For more information about Semillas Tzucacab go to [www.semillastzucacab.wordpress.com](http://www.semillastzucacab.wordpress.com)



Children dancing in Carnival Parade in Merida, Mexico.



Young Adults involved in Semillas Tzucacab Project.



Rajas tacos with Pico de Gallo.



Offering atole, a traditional corn drink in a gourd Merida, Mexico.



Traditional church in Merida, Mexico