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Astronomy Outreach Adventures in Rural Guatemala

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Astronomy can be an inspirational gateway to learning science and analytical reasoning, and to careers in STEM fields—particularly important in developing countries where educational opportunities can be scarce. Following this idea and my interest in learning about other cultures, I decided to spend 6 weeks in late 2011 (between Ph.D. and postdoc) doing astronomy public outreach in Guatemala. I volunteered through a Spanish language school embedded in a poor rural community (typical earning $\sim$ \$3/day), working mostly with children. My teaching goals were primarily attitudinal: to encourage people to observe and ask questions about the world around them, and to show them that phenomena have explanations that we can understand. My tools were a Galileoscope, Earth ball, diffraction grating glasses, and pictures of planets and galaxies. People were really excited and curious about astronomy, and it was rewarding for me to get to know people from a different cultural background. I share my experiences to show how a short gap between Ph.D. and postdoc can be taken for doing public outreach, to offer ideas for sharing astronomy in rural underdeveloped areas, and to encourage others in bringing astronomy to educationally disadvantaged parts of the world as well.

Figure 1. 8-year-old Luis (and Linda) with the Earth ball, outside Luis's family's house (in a rural community an hour outside Quetzaltenango, Guatemala). Luis couldn't read at all and had only a very basic understanding of arithmetic, but he loved learning—especially the locations of Guatemala, California and England on the Earth ball, which he proudly showed anyone who walked by down the street.

I have written an article about my experiences in Guatemala published in the American Physical Society's Forum on Education Newsletter, Spring 2012, available at http://www.aps.org/units/fed/newsletters/spring2012/strubbe.cfm.