



Taylor McIntosh of Auburn holds his 4-year-old sister Ella, who was adopted from Guatemala by his father and stepmother, Todd and Sue McIntosh.

## A brother's gift: 'Images and sounds I captured in a place you could have called home.'

PHOTO BY JOSE LEIVA AND INTERVIEW BY LINDA LEIVA

A 40-acre ravine teeming with vultures and smelling of methane gas would hardly be considered inspiration for a young man who desired to give his little sister a gift. But such was the case when Taylor McIntosh, 21, of Auburn, wanted to go to Guatemala City to record life as it was for his 4-year-old sister, Ella, who was adopted from Guatemala at the age of 6 months by his father, Todd, and stepmother, Sue McIntosh of Yarmouth.

With the help and encouragement of his dad, young McIntosh achieved his dream.

Last summer, McIntosh traveled to Guatemala City to volunteer at Safe Passage, a nonprofit organization whose mission is "to create opportunities and foster dignity through the power of education."

McIntosh — a graduate of Edward Little High School — wanted to create a movie and take photographs that would record what life would have been like had his little sister Ella not been adopted. "I was just itching for a way to get down there and make a film," he said. However he was not prepared for the depth of poverty and graphic display of life in the Guatemala City dump.

"You can see vultures flying about and smell the methane gas . . . and see the food vendors along the bottom of the ravine at the edge of the dump."

But, McIntosh says he found hope in the eyes of the children he photographed at the Safe Passage school where he worked as a volunteer.

According to the Safe Passage Web site, the organization has provided "comprehensive and integrated programs that foster hope and education to the children and families of the Guatemala City garbage dump" for the past 10 years. This dump is the repository of one-third of the country's waste, trash, recyclables and discarded items, and is a home and worksite for an estimated 4,000 people.

Human and animal corpses, gas tanks, and toxins fill the landscape, where 30,000 squatters reside along the dump's perimeter. "The workers pay the city a fee for a permit to clean the dump and then, in turn, they will be paid pennies a day when the gigantic bundles of recyclables are returned," McIntosh said.

In some cases, families have lived and worked at the dump for three generations.

On Jan. 1, at Two Point Gallery on Congress Street in Portland, McIntosh's gift for his sister became a reality. He opened a photographic art show, titled "For Ella." The show has over 35 black-and-white prints of faces and images of Guatemala City. There is a video that displays Guatemala City in its contrasts: fountains, bicyclists, calla lilies and vultures, crosses and trash.

McIntosh has captured the life of children "just being children," he said.

One of the images depicts children playing on a jungle gym in the middle of a playground sur-

### About this series

"IN SIGHT" is an occasional column exploring the unique personalities, places and things in Maine through a single photograph and brief interview.

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## IN SIGHT



### Gift

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rounded by graffiti-covered concrete walls, topped with barbed wire, reminding the viewer of a prison enclosure. Another image shows militia men in the back of an open truck bed, carrying what appears to be AK47s, which McIntosh says is common everywhere.

"In some ways they were just like kids anywhere," he says. One of the images records children mugging for the camera, another shows children sticking out their tongues and holding up fingers behind their friend's head. The smiling faces and haunting eyes of the children motivate McIntosh to return. It is his goal to go back again and work with Safe Passage.

There is a bit of irony in the story that McIntosh brought home. Unbeknownst

to him, his sister's preschool in Yarmouth sponsors some of the children whom he photographed while at the Safe Passage school where he worked.

The gift McIntosh sought to give his sister can best be summed up in a framed letter that is displayed on a wall of the gallery: "Ella, In the summer of 2009, just two and a half years after your adoption, I traveled to Guatemala City, Guatemala. For five weeks I helped a wonderful teacher named Brenda with children at an inner city school. Their parents worked in or around the Guatemala City garbage dump.

"Although this took up the majority of my time, my main motive for traveling to your birthplace was to take these photographs and make this film for you. These are images and sounds I captured in a place you could have called home. Love Always, Your Brother."