



Newsletter | September 2026



The *heritage* our students embody

Hispanic Heritage Month began in the United States in the late 1960s, first as a single day before expanding into a full month in 1988.

It exists to recognize the contributions of Hispanic countries, immigrants, and communities to American life, through art, food, music, and generations of inherited knowledge. This year's theme, "Unidos, Somos Mas," speaks to the strength found in shared culture and connection.

Guatemala is one of the countries this month recognizes.

Heritage carries a community's deeper roots and history, the traditions and knowledge passed down by those who came before. Culture is what gets built and reshaped generation to generation, shifting as it goes.

Without intentional effort, that inheritance can fade. At Safe Passage, sustaining it happens in more places than any single classroom: in daily routines, in family involvement, in celebrations like Independence Day, and in school activities like expeditions, which are part of our

educational model.

Two recent expeditions are a great example of that effort. The Green Pharmacy expedition asks students to explore the medicinal plants their ancestors used. The Life of a Tortilla expedition follows the full cycle of corn and what it has meant to Guatemala for generations.

Guatemalan heritage is actively reflected on and built into Safe Passage's curriculum. It is a deep part of each child's sense of self, one that restores a sense of belonging and leadership grounded in everything they already know and are able to contribute.



Believing In the Power of Each Student - *Every Day*

Monthly giving gives Safe Passage funding they can count on, every month, through whatever changes the year brings. That reliability lets staff commit to programs like expeditions for the full school year, with the confidence to plan ahead.

Beyond funding programs, that same reliability keeps Safe Passage a place where students feel supported enough to learn, explore their culture, and grow into the leaders they're becoming.

Right now, \$400 remains to reach a \$7,200 match, so any new or increased monthly commitment will be matched dollar for dollar until that goal is met. Give \$25 or more a month, and your name is added to

our Giving Wall with a hand-painted tile.

If a recurring gift is something you've been considering, this is a good moment to start.

[Become a Monthly Donor](#)



How Our First *School Band* Came Together

In November 2025, one of Safe Passage's music teachers, Gabriela Benavente, got a call about donated instruments sitting in storage. The question was simple: could they be used? Armed with a roll of masking tape and a lot of patience, Gabriela and her father spent several days of the school break repairing each one.

When the 2026 school year began, Gabriela started identifying students with a natural sense of rhythm and musical curiosity. As the days passed, thirty students said yes. Without trumpets, they built their sound around liras, percussion, and melódicas, the instrument students already knew from class. Seeing the students' talent and enthusiasm, funds were approved to complete the instrument repairs and purchase carrying straps.

Practices were limited to just 15 minutes every Thursday, scheduled around their regular classes. Despite a brief setback when two snare drums broke—prompting Gabriela and teacher Magaly Mejía to personally cover the replacement parts—the group pushed forward.

The band was never meant to leave the classroom. Then, upon hearing them rehearse and seeing how far they had come, Safe Passage's Comité de Cultura invited them to lead the school's first Independence Day parade. Four teachers who had once been part of a band themselves stepped in to teach marching formation. Gabriela Benavente led the group, with Magaly Mejía leading percussion and Gabriela Yax leading liras. Margot Girón took on the role of commander. The band managed to fit in two general rehearsals before the big day.

The rest of the school joined in, with students representing all 18 departments of Guatemala in the parade. Parents and neighbors joined the celebration, walking alongside the route and enjoying how thirty students who said yes to an instrument turned into the first marching band, and the first parade, in Safe Passage's history.

The Hanley Denning Experimental School *Marching Band*







Inside *Expeditionary* Learning

At Safe Passage, learning goes well beyond the corners of a textbook. Expeditionary Learning is the pedagogy behind our full-day school, built around "expeditions": extended units that weave together science, social studies, reading, math, and the arts through one central topic.

Expeditions take students outside the classroom for research, group work, and community outings, and end with a final presentation students prepare themselves in front of a larger student body, teachers and staff, and on occasion family members. The goal is for students to see how what they're learning applies beyond the classroom and to share it.

This year, one of the ninth grade expeditions centered on vermicultivo: raising worms to produce organic fertilizer. Students managed their own worm-rearing projects from start to finish, including harvesting the leachate the worms produced as natural fertilizer.

Beyond the science, students created a comic book about worms, drawn by hand and later digitized. The comic followed the worms' own journey through the composting process, turning what students learned into a story other students, and readers, can follow.

Called "Oro Verde" (Green Gold), this expedition is one example of how Expeditionary Learning turns a single topic into months of connected

Experiential Learning turns a single topic into months of connected, hands-on work.





ExpoTEC: From an Idea to a Finished Platform

ExpoTEC is the Oportunidades Educational Program's technology fair, now in its third edition.

This year's theme, *"De la Idea al Clic"* (*"From Idea to Click"*), captured the journey each of the 58 participating affiliates took: starting with a problem they identified themselves, then building a working platform to solve it through months of programming and development.

This year dropped the traditional judging panel. Affiliates designed and built the fair's own voting system instead, a webpage linked to a database, so parents and guests could vote directly for their favorite project in each room.

This was also the first year ExpoTEC opened beyond Oportunidades families to the full Camino Seguro community, with attendance growing from an average of 70 parents in past years to more than 100 family members and guests.

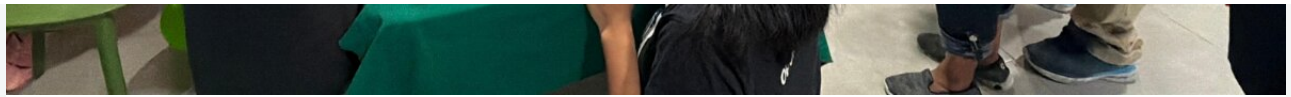
Behind every finished platform were months of preparation: late nights spent working through code, logical problem-solving, and the kind of persistence that only comes from building something from nothing.

ExpoTEC asks affiliates to design, program, and defend a working solution built entirely from scratch. Getting there takes months of preparation: late nights working through code, logical problem-solving, and the discipline it takes to see a project through.

That work becomes part of each affiliate's path toward their academic and professional future.







A Volunteer's Time at Safe Passage: *"So Many Memories, So Many Wonderful People"*

This month, we're sharing a testimonial from someone who became part of the Safe Passage community in a different way: a long-term volunteer.

Michelle Stapleton first came to Safe Passage on a short service trip, already familiar with Hanley Denning's story from her home in Maine. That visit turned into several months living and working alongside students, teachers, and staff across the school. As her time at Safe Passage comes to a close, she shared what those months looked like, in her own words.

Confession: When I visited Safe Passage on a service trip, I was scouting it for a longer-term volunteer opportunity. Living in Maine I already knew about Hanley Denning and the school's history; I just wanted to see it in

person before committing to something longer.

Spending months here I got to experience so much. I got to be a part of the community. Got to really know students and staff. Make friends.

At Jardín the littlest kids take the Guatemalan tradition of greeting you with a hug seriously, imagine 5-6 littles around your waist at the same time when you enter a classroom.

At Colegio, first graders' faces lit up when I pulled up a chair, asking "Do you want to practice the vocabulary with me?" Fifth-grade boys obsessively repeating the internet meme "six seven" made me smile.

The Básico kids were fearless in the school soccer tournament. (A girl won the trophy for best player!) They blossomed with the move into their own building.

At Oportunidades, high schoolers shared their career dreams, medicine, accounting, graphic design, when we practiced English conversations.

Kids given opportunities excelled. Teachers made learning fun; did students playing carefully-crafted games even realize those were academic lessons?

Kitchen and cleaning crews, security and administration, everyone contributed to the mission.

My time here ends when the school year closes in October. I'll take so many memories and miss so many wonderful people. Thank you, Safe Passage, for this opportunity.

Michelle's *favorite photos* from her time at Safe Passage





If Michelle's experience resonated with you, and you're thinking about spending a longer stretch of time at Safe Passage too, there's a place for

spending a longer stretch of time at Safe Passage too, there's a place for you here.

Interested in learning more about volunteer opportunities?

Visit safepassage.org/visit.

At Safe Passage, heritage is something students reflect on and engage every day, through their work, their leadership, and the belief that their community's story is theirs to carry forward.

Follow along on [Instagram](#) / [Facebook](#) for more school video clips, student interviews, and behind-the-scenes moments!

Thank you for reading, and for being part of this community.

Warmly,

The Safe Passage Team.



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