

2007 Puentes Bridges to Mexico
Dave Williams Puentes Trip Report
December 10, 2007

Introduction:

From Friday, November 30th, through Sunday, December 9th 2007, I had the opportunity to participate in the 2007 Puentes Bridges trip to Mexico. It was a remarkable, wonderful and eye-opening experience. The purpose of the trip was to provide a Mexican culture and Spanish language immersion experience. The trip was certainly that and much more. Through the trip I learned much more about how Mexicans are working in agriculture in Wisconsin (primarily on dairy farms) and the implications of that employment.

We traveled as a group of fourteen: six people from four dairy farms in Western Wisconsin and Northern Illinois (a father and son from one operation, a daughter/manager from another, an owner/operator from another and a husband and wife owner/operator from another), two UW-Extension county-based educators (one Family Living Agent and one Community, Natural Resources and Economic Development Agent) and their community partners (one from a County Health and Human Services Department and another from a County Land Conservation Department), a High School Spanish language teacher, a woman that works as a producer at a major television network (working on a course project to develop filming, interviewing and editing skills), and two persons from UW-Extension with statewide responsibilities (Dan Hill from the CNRED Local Government Center) and me (Dave Williams, Agriculture and Natural Resources Extension Program Area, Associate Program Director). The group was led by Shaun Duvall from Puentes Bridges.

Puentes Bridges coordinated the trip with the Cemanahauc Educational Community organization located in Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico. Cemanahauc focuses its work on Spanish language training and Mexican culture immersion experiences. We traveled by plane from Wisconsin to Mexico City, and then by bus while in Mexico. The bus was owned and operated by Cemanahauc.

Highlights of the trip included:

- “Agriculture in Morelos”, a presentation by Hector Sanchez Mejorada, Mexican Government Livestock Director for the State of Morelos.
- “Mexican Men Working on Dairy Farms in the Upper Midwest of the United States”, a presentation by Francisco (Paco) Guerrero Garro, Director of Cemanahauc
- A visit and tour of Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos, an orphanage for 700-800 Mexican orphans.
- A trip and tour of the Teotihuacan ruin site. This famous site in the broad valley of what is now Mexico City was the cultural center of the ancient Teotihuacan city and culture. At one point around 350 A.D. approximately 200,000 people lived in the area. The site and two of the pyramids located at the site are among the largest in Central America. Thousands to millions of people come to visit this site annually. To some degree or another, the descendants of the Teotihuacan culture make up much of the Mexican population today.
- Four days of intensive Spanish language training (approximately five hours per day) at Cemanahauc’s rural studies center in the Village of Buenavista, State of Guerrero. During this training we stayed in the homes of Buenavista village residents. We also participated in various Mexican cultural activities (making leather goods, cooking traditional Mexican food, horseback riding, guitar playing, basket weaving, etc). During these activities we learned something about these activities that are common in rural

Mexico and we had a chance to interact with people from the local Buenavista community.

- A two-day stay in the City of Orizaba, in the State of Veracruz. From Orizaba we visited several small communities in Veracruz including Xuchiles, Tlaquilpa and Astacinga to visit the family members of some of the Mexican employees who work on Wisconsin dairy farms. These visits to the family's homes were always accompanied by meals and conversation.

Observations:

The trip was very well organized and was an extremely valuable Spanish language and cultural immersion experience. Although I have traveled to Mexico before, (three times) those times were primarily for vacation and touring ancient Mayan ruin sites. I have visited and to some degree experienced the culture of three other Mexican cities – Guatimala, Oaxaca, and Merida. This Puentes Bridges trip provided a much more intensive cultural immersion experience. The Spanish language training and interacting with families and residents in Buenavista was excellent. Buenavista is a middle class village in one of the poorer states of Mexico - Guerrero. This provided a glimpse of what it is like for Mexicans to live and work in Wisconsin, knowing little or no English when they come. It also shed light on some of the challenges rural Mexican villagers have to go through to earn a living. I was able to gain a better understanding of Spanish as a language and to some degree increased my ability to speak and write Spanish.

The two presentations by the State of Morelos Livestock Director and Paco Guerrero were extremely insightful. Paco Guerrero's discussion of the role and responsibilities of the "Patron" in Mexican society was very informative and everyone agreed that it has significant implications for dairy farm employers of Mexican employees. There appears to be an educational opportunity for Extension around this subject.

Probably the most valuable part of the trip was the visit to the small, rural and poor communities of Xuchiles, Tlaquilpa and Astacinga in the State of Veracruz. Seeing and visiting the families of Wisconsin dairy farm employees from Mexico was a tremendous experience. Because the villages are so poor with only low paying jobs and few employment opportunities, most men are traveling to the United States to seek employment in low skill jobs. This includes jobs on modern and mostly larger Wisconsin dairy farms. While employed, these men send back thousands of dollars to their Mexican families back home. These remittances and the fact that the men are away from their communities and families have huge economic and social implications. The visits to Tlaquilpa and Astacinga revealed that these remittances are to a significant degree having huge community and economic impacts as new houses are being built. It was also informative to see how the Wisconsin dairy farm employers reacted to meeting the families of their employees. These employers have developed close relationships with their employees and seeing their employee's families (spouses, children and extended family members) was very emotional.

Another valuable aspect of the trip was the interaction between group members. It was extremely beneficial for me to be able to interact with the dairy farm business owners/managers. I took the time to interview the six participants from all four of the dairy farm families asking general questions about their experiences with Mexican employees and the challenges they and their employees face. It was good to have Dan Hill along to discuss the implications and opportunities for UW-Extension educational programming regarding issues around Mexicans living and working in Wisconsin communities. The community partners were very engaged with their county agent counterparts (and the other group members) and brought valuable perspectives of how their work is being impacted by the rapidly changing demographics of the population in their counties.

Recommendations/suggestions for possible future trips:

- Dan Hill provided some pre-trip materials that we were encouraged to read and study. If the trip is made again, I would encourage this to be done again. The readings from Kaleidoscope on the recent immigration of Mexicans to Wisconsin and the chapter on “Understanding Culture” provided very good background information.
- If the trip is made again, I would encourage a similar mix of participants – county agents, community partners, persons with UW-Extension statewide responsibilities and hopefully some others from the agricultural community (farmer owner/operators with Mexican employees, state agency and/or other UW-Extension partners).
- If the trip is made again, I would encourage a language component and if possible, home stays. Although it is hard to pick up much Spanish in four days, the language speaking experience and cultural experience is invaluable.
- Even though our daily schedules were extremely full, I would encourage some consistent time to be set aside for debriefing so that group members could better share their experiences and what they are thinking and feeling. We had some time for this in one-on-one and small group discussions, but unfortunately the days were so full, there wasn't much time for whole group discussions. I would recommend that some Buenavista cultural activity time be reduced to provide some time for whole group discussions.
- If the trip is made again, I would like to see at least one, if not two, agriculture agents (and perhaps a community partner – dairy farmer or manager or dairy industry person, or horticulture/landscape business owner/operator) make the trip. To accomplish this, information about the dates, criteria, etc. would need to be provided earlier so that decisions can be made in time for participation on the next Puentes trip.

What have I have gained and how will use this experience?:

This was an extremely valuable experience, increasing considerably my understanding of the Mexican culture. I really appreciated the chance to visit and experience big city, village and very small, rural community environments along with getting to interact with so many Mexicans from different walks of life - language instructors, family stays, school activity leaders, families of employees from Wisconsin dairy farms, presenters, etc.

It is hard to predict the impact of this multi-cultural experience. I do plan to stay involved with the immigration subject and UW-Extension's role in immigration and Hispanic/Mexican cultural issues. In my role as Associate Program Director, it will be hard to carve out time for much direct teaching on the things I've learned. I will be able to encourage ANRE programming in this area and can help to define what the appropriate roles and responsibilities are. This is a new and perhaps more challenging area to conduct programming and I believe a cross program area approach would be helpful in at least some situations. Given this broad cultural immersion experience, I will be better able to encourage a cross program area approach. I brought back some ideas for specific educational programs.

Summary:

This was an extremely valuable Spanish language and Mexican cultural immersion experience. Given the influx of Mexicans living and working in so many Wisconsin communities, and the importance of Mexicans working on Wisconsin dairy farms, I encourage UW-Extension to continue to support this experience. The Puentes Bridges trip is an excellent way to build Extension's capacity for working in multi-cultural areas.