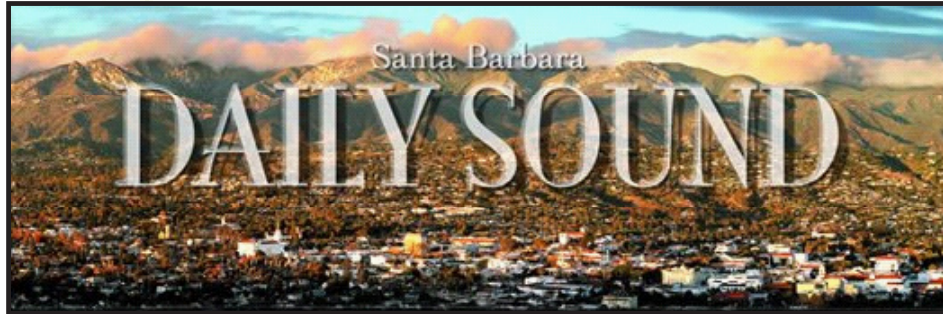


ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT CORNER



Benjamin “BJ” Williams
Class of 1997



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Santa Barbara native drops law for altruism



BY ERIC LINDBERG
DAILY SOUND STAFF WRITER

Benjamin Williams with a young girl who received eye surgery to correct a severely droopy eyelid which blocked her vision. Williams, along with a few other volunteers, serves as translators between doctor and patient.

Several years ago, it seemed as though Benjamin Williams was on an inevitable track to become a lawyer.

With a high-paying gig as a paralegal and law school applications in the works, the 26-year-old Santa Barbara native was “at the top of his game,” as his mother puts it. But something kept nagging at him, she says, a burning feeling that he could do more.

“He was really unhappy about how the world was viewing the United States and kind of made a U-turn,” she says.

Now 28, Williams is in the Peace Corps, teaching kids and working on community projects in El Pital, a rural village in El Salvador.

It’s undoubtedly a vastly different world, as evidenced by posts on a Web site Williams updates when he gets a chance.

“I feel like I’m dreaming much of the time,” he writes, “possibly because I was snatched out of such a comfortable life so suddenly and thrown into the deep end of this life.”



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When he’s not teaching English classes, helping a friend make adobe bricks for a home, or countless other small projects throughout the community, he might, on the rare occasion, be helping out with a goat castration.

His latest endeavor is a computer center and library for the community of 800, a project recently approved by Peace Corps officials.

As an agrarian village, El Pital has few job prospects beyond subsistence farming, Williams explains. Its four-room school serves the village and three smaller nearby communities.

“The four teachers are overwhelmed and have few resources at their disposal,” he writes. “Currently, the school has three computers, which students use in pairs, twice a week. With access to only these three computers and no library, the students here are clearly underserved and much of their potential goes untapped.”

And though it may seem counter-intuitive to build a computer lab in a village with no indoor plumbing or bathrooms, computer literacy tops the Salvadoran government’s list of long-term goals for its youth, as modernization is creating a demand for computer-savvy workers.

Opening a library is also high on the list for Williams, who notes major progress among many of the kids he is teaching to read. Some of his students could not read at all when he started and are now scanning pages fluidly.

“Sadly, nobody here reads for pleasure — no newspapers, books or magazines,” he writes. “And I sincerely believe that incorporating books and reading into the culture here will dramatically change this community for the better.”

Williams says the computer center and library will open kids up to a new world, exercise their imaginations, and give them a different view of their future, one that doesn’t involve packing up and attempting the illegal and dangerous trip north to the United States.

Getting top officials in the Peace Corps to give the go-ahead is a major step toward realizing the Information Center Project, as it has been dubbed.

Williams also received a donation of 30 computers from his former employer, Keesal Young & Logan law firm, and books from the United States and El Salvador.

And while short on money, Williams said El Pital is overflowing with enthusiasm and has pledged to contribute 40 percent of the total cost of the project through labor, fundraisers and natural resources. The remaining balance, about \$11,200, is the missing puzzle piece.



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After getting a donor page on the Peace Corps website a week and a half ago, Williams’ mother, Mary Jo, says the project has already received nearly \$4,000. She’s hoping an offer by her brother to donate 20 percent of sales at his restaurant this Sunday — Petrini’s Restaurant at 14 W. Calle Laureles — will bring in more support.

“He has a really good heart, a big heart,” she says of her son. “He’s just an incredibly compassionate young person.”

Despite his admitted discomfort at asking for money, Williams also made a plea on his Web site, beninelpital.blogspot.com, assuring visitors that he will send out photos and updates of the project as he personally oversees its construction.

“I realize that many of you are feeling the tax-time crunch and the tightening tentacles of recession,” he writes, “but if you have some spare cash, please think of El Pital and the bounties this project will bring.”

With nearly one and a half years at El Pital under his belt already, Williams will stay on until December, when his two-year commitment to the Peace Corps is up. Regardless of what he does then, his mother says his family will always be proud of him.

“It was a bigger, greater change,” she says. “Bigger than himself. The greater world is out there and to do something outside of yourself is a really good thing.”

http://sbdailysound.blogspot.com/2008/04/santa-barbara-native-drops-law-for_09.html



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