

***Examining the impacts of
Próximo Paso and Oportunidades
on the young people participating
in both programs***



**Researched and written by Marcia Bernbaum, PhD
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ¹

Between July 1 and July 12, 2024, Dr. Marcia Bernbaum visited Guatemala, as a volunteer², to assess the impact of two of Safe Passage's programs, Oportunidades and Próximo Paso, on the lives of 15 young people, 12 who currently participate in Oportunidades and 3 who have graduated. The 15 youth live in high-crime neighborhoods located near the largest garbage dump in Central America. Several of their parents earned or currently earn a living recycling items from the landfill. All come from families classified as extremely poor.

Oportunidades is a two- or three-day a week half-day program designed for students who have completed ninth grade at the Hanley Denning Experimental School which is part of Safe Passage. It provides structured educational reinforcement and academic enrichment with a focus on English and computer skills, supporting the time students spend attending a Guatemalan public high school to complete their formal education.

Próximo Paso, the complementary program that operates in the facilities where Oportunidades is located, offers vocational and employment orientation, as well as a wide variety of workshops to prepare students starting in seventh grade at the Hanley Denning Experimental School until they graduate with the support of Oportunidades, preparing them for their lives as adults for the world of work and/or continued education. Próximo Paso administers a complete battery of psycho-technical tests to help students decide what career to study before they enter an Instituto Diversificado:e. It also offers support in finding internship spaces, job placement, a plan for a first work experience at Safe Passage's facilities called "Plan de Aprendizajes" (Apprenticeship Plan), as well as professional accompaniment services. It also offers professional accompaniment and monitoring services for entry into public universities.

The interview protocol

To prepare the interview protocol, the author asked ten Safe Passage staff members (including the Executive Director of Safe Passage, members of Safe Passage senior management, and staff from Oportunidades and Próximo Paso) what they wanted to learn from the study. She also interviewed the Safe Passage Board Chair, two active board members, and one former board member to identify what they wanted to learn.

The interview protocol addressed three topics:

1. Background information on students and their families, including their experience once in the public school system after 9th grade.
2. Their experiences with and opinion about Próximo Paso and Oportunidades.
3. The impact of Próximo Paso, Oportunidades and Safe Passage in general on their lives.

Main results and conclusions

It is noticeable that many of the youth interviewed, through what they said in their interviews and their facial expressions as they spoke, embodied what they have learned at Safe Passage: confidence in themselves and hope for the future; they see themselves preparing for success as adults; a strong belief in key values consciously introduced and woven into their daily activities throughout their experience at the Hanley Denning Experimental School and in Oportunidades; indications, among several interviewees, that they understand what it means to be a leader. Many offered thought-provoking responses when asked how they would respond if asked by a donor why the donor should support Safe Passage (including Oportunidades and Próximo Paso).

The author came away—based on her interviews with the 15 youth; what she learned from extensive interviews with Oportunidades and Próximo Paso staff and seeing them in action—with a clear impression of a very dedicated and committed Oportunidades and Próximo Paso staff. From interactions with those running both programs it is clear that they have a well thought out vision of where they would like to take both programs. This vision extends well beyond the graduation of Opor-

¹ This report focuses on two programs of Safe Passage – Oportunidades and Próximo Paso. Another focus could have been on the Hanley Denning Experimental School, covering preschool through grade 9 which applies Experiential Learning (EL), a holistic approach that expands the definition of education to mitigate underlying factors that contribute to poor educational outcomes. The author recommends that Safe Passage consider having a study, also with a qualitative focus, carried out on this very interesting program as she believes there is much to be learned from its application in Guatemala.

² Dr. Bernbaum covered all expenses related to her travel and stay in Guatemala.

tunidades and Próximo Paso students from public high schools. The author was also impressed with how Oportunidades and Próximo Paso staff have set the framework for achieving their visions for both programs through learning from both their successes and mistakes along the way.

Recommendations

Continue strengthening support to both programs over the coming years by: (a) hiring the necessary personnel to reinforce both programs; (b) reinforcing the capacity of existing personnel; (c) updating technological resources and equipment; (d) obtaining scholarships for graduates who wish to continue their studies at a university or specialized institution.

That donors and those interested in the possibility of supporting one or both programs contact Safe Passage's Director of Development³ to explore opportunities to connect your interests with the most current needs of the programs and organization.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to offer my deepest thanks to Safe Passage and its staff for giving me the opportunity to conduct this study.

This project got its start in a very innocent way. I had heard about the garbage dump in Guatemala City during my annual visits to Guatemala during the 1980s when I visited Guatemala annually in my capacity as an Education Officer for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Forty years later, in early 2024, at a La Clínica del Pueblo meeting in Washington DC, I met Rachel Meyn Ugarte. She told me that she had been involved for many years in collaborating with Hanley Denning, the founder of Safe Passage, to help the children of families working in the garbage dump. Curious, I went to the Safe Passage website. What I saw captured my imagination and I realized they were accepting volunteers. I sent my Curriculum Vita to Safe Passage offering my services thinking that they were going to invite me to come as a volunteer to help in one of the school classes.

Seeing my experience, Safe Passage's Executive Director, Erin Mooney, emailed me to say that she thought I could do something more. She connected me with the Jessie Dill Jacobs, the former Director of Development, who helped me think through how I would approach carrying out the study. We zoomed and reached an agreement that I would come to Guatemala to do a study on the impact of Safe Passage, focusing on the Oportunidades and Próximo Paso programs, on a sample of 15 students enrolled in the programs and recent graduates.

From there, a process began that resulted in sending documents about Safe Passage, Oportunidades and Próximo Paso, conducting zoom interviews to obtain more information. It culminated in my visit to Guatemala to interview 15 Oportunidades students and graduates between July 1 and July 13, 2024.

I don't have enough words to thank all the people who collaborated with me: in the process of preparing for my visit to Guatemala; during my stay in Guatemala; and after my return to Washington DC.

To Erin Mooney, for approaching me to explore the role I could play as a volunteer and for having faith in my ability to do this research; to Jessie Dill Jacobs for helping me think through how to best approach for carrying out the study; to Karla Subuyuj for making logistical arrangements for the study while in Guatemala; to Patricia Barneond for giving me hours of her time telling me about the beginning of the implementation of Expeditionary Learning at the Hanley Denning Experimental School and the history of Próximo Paso and Oportunidades; to Rachel Meyn Ugarte for telling me about the history of Safe Passage; to Pablo Callejas for meeting with me to add aspects of the birth of Próximo Paso and Oportunidades; and to three members and one former board member of Safe Passage (Jessica Britt, Susanna Place, Esther Brol, Cristina Botran) who volunteered their time to share with me what they wanted to learn as a result of the study.

I wish to give a very special acknowledgement and thanks to the fifteen Oportunidades students and graduates who took time out of their studies and others who made time to allow themselves to be interviewed for the study during my two weeks in Guatemala between July 1 and 13: Alexandra, Angeli, Berenice, Cristian, Erick, Jose Luis, Jose Manuel, Juan Fernando, Lester, Maria Jose, Marvin, Melany, Rosmery, Wilmer. Also, for taking the time to review and approve their testimonies that appear in this document. And to two moms who took time out of their time to come and be interviewed: Blanca Toh and Norma Martinez..

A VERY special thank you to all the staff at Oportunidades and Próximo Paso, for their warm welcome to their offices next to the dump, their incredible support, and patience with me while answering my numerous questions: Jayro Barahona, Alan Alvarez, Jenifer Ortega, Jose Caracun, Keyla Paola Vasquez, Marvin Apen, Melany Taque.

And my appreciation to the many individuals who took time out of their busy schedules to edit the draft report and provide

Continued...

suggestions for clarifying statements made: Erin Mooney, Jessica Britt, Rachel Meyn Ugarte, Patricia Barneond, Pablo Callejas, Karla Subuyuj, Michael Kosta, and Rachel Kosta.

Finally, profound thanks to Mario Chamorro, in charge of the Oportunidades and Próximo Paso programs, for giving hours and hours and hours of his time to prepare me for my visit to Guatemala; for taking care of me during my stay; and for his attention to the immense number of emails I sent to him after my return from Guatemala requesting clarification and further information. Mario, without your attentive help, interest, and commitment to help me in everything I needed, I would not have been able to carry out this study. A million thanks!!!!

FOREWORD

After my arrival at Safe Passage's main office in Zone 7 of Guatemala City on July 1, 2024, I was driven in a Safe Passage van three blocks to a large, gated entrance located next to the entrance of the garbage dump that Hanley Denning first visited in 1998, and which is now the largest garbage dump in Central America. An estimated 10,000 people arrive daily to identify items to be recycled from the 500 garbage trucks that pass through this entrance each day.

The building that houses Oportunidades and Próximo Paso — the focuses of my study — occupies a small compound that overlooks the landfill. I had strict instructions not to walk on the streets outside because they were too dangerous. Entering the landfill was out of the question.

As I entered the compound, I walked down a hallway past a group of Oportunidades "affiliates" in a large room to my left, in a classroom full of computers and students. They were working in groups to prepare for a technology fair they would be hosting for their parents in two weeks (which I attended the day before returning to the U.S.). Their teacher, Alan Alvarez, was engrossed in moving from one group to the next to help them.

I then passed by an office occupied by Jayro Barahona, director of Próximo Paso.

The next office was occupied by Jennifer Ortega, a clinical psychologist who has been with Oportunidades for one year.

Diagonally to the right was a large room with three desks, a sofa, a coffee table, some chairs and a coffee urn.

The desk in the far corner was occupied by Mario Chamorro, who joined Safe Passage in 2015. Mario is in charge of Oportunidades, oversees the entire operation and was my main contact before my arrival, during my stay in Guatemala and after my return to the United States.

Next to Mario, to his right, was a desk occupied by José Caracún, a social worker who has been with Safe Passage for 20 years. José, head of Social Work at Safe Passage, is in charge of liaising with the parents of young people affiliated with Oportunidades.

In front of him sat Keyla Paola Vasquez, the administrative and educational assistant for the Oportunidades Program for the past year who, among other things, is in charge of ordering the supplies needed by Oportunidades affiliates and who was always there to help me, often anticipating what I needed.

During my two weeks there, I became part of the group. I had breakfast with them every morning, ate lunch with them around the coffee table and was invited to the weekly staff meetings chaired by Mario.

In between interviewing 15 "affiliates", I asked them all incessant questions as I began to "peel the onion". In all fairness, they took their time to answer patiently.

Coffee, fellowship, hugs and all the help I needed were plentiful during my two-week stay.

Marcia Bernbaum, July 1, 2024

INTRODUCTION

Background

Founded in 1999 as an educational reinforcement program by American educator Hanley Denning, today Safe Passage is an accredited full-day school with 554 students in preschool through 9th grade that incorporates a holistic approach to education through the on-site provision of integrated health services (health care, psychology and social work), daily nutrition and family support.¹

In 2015, Safe Passage adapted the Expeditionary Learning (EL) model, a proven learning model for at-risk populations, to its evolving curriculum. Safe Passage fulfilled its vision of becoming a full preschool through ninth grade school by 2021, having added a grade each year since 2012.

In 2022, the first full cohort of students who started at Safe Passage in preschool and completed ninth grade, enrolled in a new career readiness program called Oportunidades.



Oportunidades students eagerly waiting to share what they have learned at the July 13, 2024 Technology Fair

Oportunidades is a half-day program two to three days a week that provides structured educational reinforcement and academic enrichment with a focus on English and computer skills, complementing the half-day students spend attending a Guatemalan high school until they graduate.

Próximo Paso, the complementary program that operates on the premises where Oportunidades is located, offers a wide variety of workshops to prepare students from 7th grade onwards for their lives as adults and for the world of work. Próximo Paso also offers a full battery of tests to guide them in deciding what career to study once they enter a Diversified Institute. It also offers internship and job placement support, and career and college preparation services for students entering public high schools.²

Upon completion of grade 9, some graduates entered the workforce by taking low-paying jobs (even, in some cases, returning to earn a living working in the garbage dump). Most, inspired by their nine years of quality education, choose to enroll in one of Guatemala City's many specialized institutes, all public schools, that provide training in a wide variety of trades.

Depending on the trade, the program lasts two or three years (equivalent to 10o, 11o and 12o grades). Upon graduation, they have the option of joining the workforce to work in their specialty or enrolling in one of Guatemala City's universities to specialize in their trade or choose another area of study.

This study focuses on the impacts of Oportunidades and Próximo Paso on the lives of students who currently participate or have recently participated in both programs. It also shares the memories of the students interviewed at the time they entered Safe Passage, in preschool or elementary school.

Presentation of the study that is the subject of this report

Between July 1 and July 12, 2024, Dr. Marcia Bernbaum — an applied researcher with extensive experience in leading program evaluation teams as well as conducting in-depth case studies of grassroots programs that promote human rights, leadership and empowerment — interviewed 15 Safe Passage students: 12 enrolled in Oportunidades and 3 who had recently graduated from high school and were now employed, in order to assess the impact of Próximo Paso and Oportunidades on their lives.

Before visiting Guatemala, the author read several documents sent to her. She interviewed ten Safe Passage staff to learn about the programs and to ask them what they wanted to learn from the study. She also interviewed three board members

¹ For more information about Safe Passage, visit: www.safepassage.org.

² The first five paragraphs are taken verbatim from a report on Oportunidades prepared in 2023 with cost projections for 2024. Total estimated costs for Oportunidades (including all line items) in 2024 are \$214,114.23.

and one former board member to determine what they wanted to learn.³ While in Guatemala, she had the opportunity to observe several of the activities that take place at the current location of Próximo Paso and Oportunidades.

With this information in hand, she developed, in close collaboration with Próximo Paso and Oportunidades staff, Safe Passage senior management and Safe Passage Board members, a protocol⁴ for the interviews.

Audience and content of the report

This report shares what she learned. It is aimed at two main audiences: Safe Passage's own staff and Sage Passage's donors. The report is divided into four sections.

- Section I. provides context. It traces the birth and evolution of Oportunidades and Próximo and provides an overview of each program as it currently exists in 2024.
- Section II. presents the results of the 15 interviews conducted with Safe Passage students and graduates between July 1 and July 12, 2024.
- Section III. looks to the future of Oportunidades and Próximo Paso.
- Section IV. offers conclusions and recommendations.

3 The list of interviewees can be found in Annex B of the Report.

4 The protocol is located in Annex A of the Report.

I.

PRÓXIMO PASO AND OPORTUNIDADES



Oportunidades and Próximo Paso team. From left to right: Mario Chamorro, Jose Caracun, Keyla Paola Vasquez, Jayro Barahona, Jenifer Ortega, Alan Alvarez

In order to interpret the results of the 15 interviews conducted (presented in the next section), it is important that readers have prior knowledge and understanding of the Próximo Paso and Oportunidades programs, which are the subject of this study.

Readers who are already familiar with both programs may find this section useful as a refresher (as well as to learn about aspects of one or both programs that they are unfamiliar with). Readers unfamiliar with either program will benefit from what follows.

The contents of this Section have been developed with the collaboration of Mario Chamorro, Director of the Oportunidades and Próximo Paso Programs, and Jayro Barahona, Coordinator of the Próximo Paso Program. Both Mario

(who joined Safe Passage in 2015) and Jayro (who joined in 2018) have played important roles in the development of both programs.

This section is divided into two parts:

- The first section provides a brief overview of the birth and evolution of **Próximo Paso** (2015 – 2023) before turning to its primary focus, Próximo Paso as the author found it when she visited in early July 2024.
- The second section focuses on the birth and evolution of **Oportunidades** (2018 – 2023) before moving on to focus on Oportunidades as the author found it when she visited in July 2024.

Both programs grew out of the Centro de Refuerzo Educativo (CRE), the approach that Safe Passage used in its early years to provide educational and social emotional support, along with a place to do their homework and receive assistance and food, to children during the morning or afternoon when they were not attending public school while their parents worked at the landfill. When Safe Passage established its own school in 2012 and progressively added a new grade (up to 9th) in 2021, the CRE gradually faded away.⁵

What distinguishes both programs are the way in which each began and developed in the context of Safe Passage's evolution. Successes provided fertile ground on which to build and expand. Failures and unforeseen circumstances also provided equally fertile ground for learning and improvement. Each year, in preparing their work plan for the following year, Mario and Jayro consider what works, what needs to be strengthened, and what is missing and needs to be added to each program, within the funds available.

⁵ There are currently 5 students remaining in CRE.

PRÓXIMO PASO

Birth and evolution of Próximo Paso (2015 – 2023)

In 2014 Meghan McAdams, a full-time volunteer, suggested that Safe Passage consider helping CRE students once they complete their high school studies, in so doing setting the base for what has become Próximo Paso. In early 2015, Mario Chamorro⁶ was hired by Safe Passage and charged with further developing this concept. He began by helping students enrolled in CRE prepare to enter the job market or pursue higher education upon graduation from the public highschools in which they were enrolled.

⁶ Mario Chamorro is a psychologist and vocational and employment counselor and grew up in a family very committed to helping the underprivileged. After college, he worked with organizations that aided immigrants, low-income people, with a special focus on health and therapy, helping mothers of young children and the elderly.



Jayro Barahona preparing affiliates for their summer jobs as “vacacionistas”

Between 2015 and 2017, Mario designed and delivered employment-related workshops for CRE students enrolled in Diversified Institutes. He also organized the first of what would become annual job fairs. And he began studying the possibility of developing a battery of tests designed to help identify the careers that best fit each student.

Jayro Barahona⁷ was hired in 2018 to continue the development of the Próximo Paso program. Together,

Jayro and Mario expanded the focus of Próximo Paso to provide students with life skills and prepare them to enter the job market. They launched an apprenticeship scheme, called “Jóvenes Aprendices,” or Young Apprentices, offering temporary, part-time jobs, with statutory benefits, at the

Safe Passage campuses to recent graduates of the public highschools so they can establish a career path. They also began to establish links with local businesses. An employment kiosk program was launched, which ran into problems and came to an end when it became clear that CRE students did not yet have the necessary skills to take advantage of Oportunidades.

In 2019, Jayro took up the work started by Mario and began developing a battery of tests to help ninth graders identify the career they would study once they entered the Diversified Institutes the following year. The workshops were reinforced. The apprenticeship scheme continued, as did efforts to expand links with local businesses. Inter-institutional relationships were established (Junior Achievement, Valentina Group).

The onset of the pandemic in early 2020 resulted in the closure of Safe Passage facilities. Innovative approaches were needed to reach students at home. Links were established with some companies that facilitated training and education for active members and former graduate members, including Visual K, which provided two courses (one as an introduction to working life and digital marketing); Visit.org, which collaborated in the review of resumes of participants with the intention of providing feedback for improvements. EPA provided support to run a course in masonry and basic construction skills, where 72 students benefited.

With students returning in 2022 to part-time school, followed by full-time school attendance in 2023, the program continued to support active affiliates through life skills and skills development workshops. In 2023, the decision was made to expand outreach to establish linkages with local businesses.

Próximo Paso in 2024



Jayro Barahona delivering on of many employment related workshops to affiliates.

By the time the author visited Safe Passage in July 2024, Próximo Paso had become a robust program designed to strengthen the skills that enable Safe Passage enrollees to improve their quality of life and find employment (beyond working in the landfill) and/or pursue college-level education. Próximo Paso’s target populations at that time included 7thth 8thth and 9thth grade students enrolled in Basico (Middle School) at the Hanley Denning Experimental School; students enrolled in 2- or 3-year public high schools; as well as graduates.

The objectives of the program, described in a document prepared to describe Próximo Paso in 2024⁸ include:

- **Individual and group meetings** aimed at getting to know and accompany students in their academic and professional development and once they enter the labor market.

⁷ Jayro Barahona is also a psychologist. Throughout his work and professional career, he has focused his work on youth and vulnerable population. His experience in the religious field has opened significant doors, working with youth populations from a very young age to 17 years old.

⁸ The title of the report is “Próximo Paso,” written in 2024.

- **Provide** academic and career guidance to students enrolled in Middle School (7th – 9th grade) so that they can make informed career decisions as they prepare to graduate from Basic Cycle and enroll in Diversified Institutes.
- **Help** students who complete their studies at a diversified high school to enroll in a university.
- **Monitor** the situation of ex-affiliates, assisting with any labor orientation needs they may present.
- **Establish** contacts with local companies that can offer employment graduates of Oportunidades who are about to graduate from Diversificado.
- **Reinforce** the social, academic and personal skills that graduates will need when they become adults (through workshops, courses and social and recreational activities).
- **Seek** opportunities to further academic development to help program affiliates and graduates support their individual and professional development.
- **Guide** students who have benefited from scholarships.

Several of the objectives listed above are reflected in the testimonies of the 15 students interviewed for the study, which appear in Section II.

These are Próximo Paso’s objectives for 2024:

- Workshops designed to develop or reinforce social skills
- Career counseling for up to 32 students
- Assistance and support for up to 24 students entering the university
- Employing vacationers⁹ in companies (often with job offers) for up to 35 students
- Ex-affiliates participate in Safe Passage apprenticeship program to gain work experience¹⁰
- Orientation for up to 35 members and former members to prepare employment applications
- 102 elementary school students participate in Life and Career Plan¹¹

The workshops, calibrated by year, address the following topics:

Workshops offered by Próximo Paso

- Preparing for adult life:
- the importance of putting key values into practice,
- develop problem-solving skills,
- develop communication skills,
- critical and creative thinking,
- make good decisions,
- conflict resolution.

Preparation for work and specialization:

- select a career,
- prepare a CV,
- apply for a job,
- apply to college and choose a major.

⁹ Vacationers (or “vacacionistas”) are students in their last year or next to last year who are given opportunities to work at a company during their summer vacation.

¹⁰ Of the 45 apprentices who have obtained employment at Safe Passage after graduating from the Diversified Institutes, 35 have obtained employment upon completion of their apprenticeship program.

¹¹ The Career and Life plan lists objectives and activities to be carried out under Próximo Paso focusing on students in grades 7th , 8th and 9th grades with the goal of preparing them to transition, while in Opportunity, to a focus on workplace readiness.

OPORTUNIDADES

Birth and evolution of Oportunidades

In 2016, a new campus was built a few blocks away from the building that houses students between first and ninth grades and CRE participants were moved to this new building. Starting in 2018, under the direction of Trae Holland, Executive Director of Safe Passage, significant changes were made in the dynamics of the CRE program, with the goal of strengthening the skills of the participants. Trae asked Mario to lead the transition process, working with a small team.

Specifically, Trae Holland asked Mario to conduct a comprehensive review of CRE focusing on the appropriateness of its activities and costs versus benefits. Together with Jayro Barahona, who joined Safe Passage in 2018, and in close consultation with Patricia Barneond, the newly appointed Academic Director of Safe Passage, Mario drafted a document outlining the mission, vision and objectives of what would become Oportunidades in replacement of CRE.

In 2019, Oportunidades formally came into existence.



Paola Vasquez (Mario Chamorro in the background) presenting the Oportunidades program to ninth graders at the Hanley Denning Experimental School.

2020, during the height of the pandemic, a full-time technology teacher and tutor were hired. Arrangements were made to provide online classes/ assistance.

In 2021, an adaptation plan was established, which allowed students who passed ninth grade from Hanley Denning Experimental School and enrolled in Oportunidades, to have a new academic experience, different from the Expeditionary Learning methodology and closer to the national education system. In order to understand the dynamics of the Educational Centers they will attend. In addition, a hybrid program was established that allowed students to take classes at Oportunidades as well as work at home.

In 2022, the first graduating class of ninth graders from the Hanley Denning Experimental School entered Oportunidades. The students, called affiliates, were attending part-time because the pandemic had not yet ended.

In 2023, the second class of ninth-grade graduates entered Oportunidades. The students, for the first time, received certificates of completion for up to five technology courses. A new database was established, and a clinical psychologist was hired. English was found to be weak given the limited number of volunteers able to participate on an ongoing basis.

Oportunidades in 2024

An information document focused on Oportunidades, dated 2024, states as its mission, to become “a comprehensive educational program that empowers and prepares members of Safe Passage in the development of skills and abilities, social, emotional and academic, to improve their quality of life and facilitate their insertion in the labor market.”¹²

Objectives include:

- **Facilitate training courses and technological information** that enable participants to achieve competencies for the efficient and effective use of computer tools, which strengthen their performance and insertion in the current virtual market.
- **To enable participants to use the English language** in a simple, appropriate and effective manner, both spoken and written, in everyday and specific situations that allow them to communicate clearly according to their linguistic needs.

¹² Excerpted from the 2024 report entitled “Oportunidades” shared with the author.

- **To provide members with all the resources, material, social and educational** tools necessary to pass the school year and achieve academic success.
- **Reinforce the member’s positive attitudes and self-improvement** in accordance with the values of Safe Passage.
- **To foster in participants a culture of development** towards seeking and taking advantage of new opportunities.
- **Strengthen the formal academic training of members** with the development of a tutoring plan that responds to the needs and interests of members, in order to improve their performance in academic activities and thus reduce the risk of school failure.



Padres de familia consiguen permiso de sus trabajos el Sábado 13 de Julio, 2024 para asistir la Feria de Tecnología donde pueden ver lo que han aprendido sus hijos en Oportunidades

These objectives are reflected in the testimonies from interviews with the 15 students available in Section II of this report.

Students graduating from ninth grade at the Hanley Denning Experimental School become “affiliates” of Oportunidades when two conditions are met: (1) Parents sign a formal document called an “Agreement” in which they agree to pay 10% of the costs of annual educational expenses; (2) Students also sign a formal document in which they agree to take advantage of the resources offered by Oportunidades by attending half-day three days a week (for first year affiliates) or two days a week (for graduating affiliates) and participating fully in its activities.

Oportunidades, in turn, agrees to: pay the rest of the educational expenses throughout the school year at the Diversified Institutes¹³ attended by each affiliate, cover the cost of transportation to and from the Institute and attendance at Oportunidades two or three half-days a week, the cost of uniforms and materials, as well as the special equipment necessary for the trade in which the affiliate specializes.

The families of the affiliates play a key role in the success of the program. As discussed above, they must commit to pay 10% of their child’s annual educational cost in the specialized institute in which he or she is enrolled. They are also required to attend two group meetings with Opportunity staff annually. When there is a problem with an affiliate, parents are asked to come to Oportunidades to meet with Mario and Paola. While the author was in Guatemala, the parents attended a Technology Fair organized by Oportunidades affiliates on Saturday, July 13, where they showed their parents what they were learning.

José Caracún, in his role as social worker, plays a key role as liaison between Oportunidades and the parents. When meetings are called, he contacts parents to invite them. He visits the homes of missing students to find out why they are not attending Oportunidades and, when necessary, takes action to resolve the problem. He monitors the health of the students. For example, if a member becomes pregnant, he makes sure she gets the medical attention she needs. If the family has a lice infestation, he seeks resources to eliminate the lice. Also, when necessary, he helps families in crisis situations. This year, for example, one of the parents died. José found a funeral home and arranged for Safe Passage to pay a portion of the funeral expenses.

Computer training is a highly visible part of the program. Each student has the possibility of obtaining 4 or 5 certifications during their participation in Oportunidades depending on the number of years of training.

¹³ Members enrolled in Oportunidades can choose from 9 suggested Institutos Diversificados where 90% of the annual educational cost is covered.



Alan Alvarez assisting an affiliate in the technology lab.

1. Information technology
2. Excel basic level
3. Office automation
4. Introduction to programming
5. Web page design

Oportunidades currently has five full-time employees:

- Mario Chamorro, who oversees the program's operation
- Keyla Paola Vásquez, responsible for coordinating and managing the Oportunidades Educational Program.
- Alan Alvarez, technology facilitator
- Jenifer Ortega who is the clinical psychologist
- José Caracún social work coordinator for Safe Passage and works as a social worker for Oportunidades.

Marvin Apén, in his role as a tutor who helps the affiliates when they have problems in their institutes with numerical and scientific classes, attends 5 days a week at different times.



Marvin Apén tutoring an affiliate in mathematics

Oportunidades has four objectives for 2024:

- Establish procedures to measure the interpersonal competencies of affiliates.
- Strengthen the ability to assess the competencies of affiliates receiving up to 5 technology certificates.
- Increase technological resources for the use of affiliates.
- Obtain the necessary resources to provide English language training to affiliates.

THREE DATABASES

During the course of the study, the author learned that the staff of Oportunidades and Próximo Paso manage three databases that they keep up to date.

1. Jayro Barahona manages a database that keeps track of the graduates of the CRE programs (2007 – 2018) and the Oportunidades Educational Program (2019 to date). The database currently includes 190 graduates and is added to year by year. Different aspects in their lives are monitored, those who are working (formal and informal sector), for those who are studying at university (public or private) along with their life status (marital status, parenthood).
2. The Oportunidades Educational Program manages a database that allows the monitoring of each of the affiliates where the following data is recorded: attendance at their external educational centers; attendance at the Oportunidades Educational Program; requests and delivery of daily materials and specific purchases; delivery of tickets; participation in technology courses; details about relevant aspects in their social, psychological or health context; record of attention calls or sanctions; record of their academic grades whether bimonthly, quarterly or semester as appropriate; and payment of affiliations. This information is managed by Paola Vásquez, who is responsible for assisting all program functions. Mario supervises the constant updating of this resource.

3. José Caracun, in his capacity as Social Work Coordinator, manages and keeps up to date a huge database that includes the families/locations of all Safe Passage students. The database contains the following information: place of residence of the family; monthly income level of the families; person in charge of the family (father, mother, both); composition of the families.

II.

STUDY RESULTS

Between July 3 and July 12, 2024 Marcia Bernbaum interviewed 12 affiliates enrolled in Oportunidades who also receive support through Próximo Paso. She also interviewed 3 former affiliates who have completed their high school education and are now employed.

The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and a quarter. The questions, organized around three themes (see below), were formulated by asking the following groups what they would like to learn from the study: Oportunidades and Próximo Paso staff, Safe Passage senior management, three current members of the Safe Passage Board of Directors, and one former member. Interviewees were told that, if they were to be quoted in the report, they would need to review/approve each testimony attributed to her or him. They were also told that they would receive a report with findings.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS/TOPICS

Profile of interviewees

- Tell me about yourself (family, place of residence, parents' profession, first years of life, siblings enrolled in Safe Passage).
- When did you join Safe Passage?
- Please share with me a first memory of when you entered Safe Passage.
- How did you choose the career you are currently preparing for?
- What high school did you choose when you finished ninth grade at Próximo Paso?
- What was your high school experience?
- Were you adequately prepared when you transitioned from Safe Passage to the institute?

Focus on Oportunidades and Próximo Paso

- Share your experience participating in Oportunidades: what you like, what you don't like, what could be improved.
- Share your experience with Próximo Paso: what you like, what you don't like, what can be improved.

Impacts

- What are your aspirations for the future?
- How has Safe Passage influenced your life?
- How has your experiences at Oportunidades and Próximo Paso influenced your life?
- What are your values and how do you put them into practice?
- Do you consider yourself a leader?
- If you were asked, what would you tell a donor about why they should support Safe Passage?

Where possible, the author relied on the verbatim responses of interviewees ¹⁴.

Readers will note, as they read the testimonies provided in this section, the frequency with which the 15 interviewees reflect in their testimonies what they have learned from their experiences with Safe Passage, in general, and Oportunidades and Próximo Paso, in particular.

PROFILE OF THE FIFTEEN YOUTH INTERVIEWED

The sample consisted of 6 young women and 9 young men between the ages of 15 and 20; half were \ Bags of garbage collected from the dump in front of a house. It is possible that more bags are nearby in Zones 3 and 7, both considered

¹⁴ All testimonies and quotations in this document have been previously approved by the interviewees.



Bags of valuable garbage obtained in the dump in front of a house. It is possible other bags are being stored in the house.

dangerous places to live. Three mothers and three fathers earn their living working at the garbage dump located in Zone 3. The remaining mothers do not work outside the home or clean other people’s houses. The fathers work in the nearby maquilas or in manual labor. Seven members reported having a very difficult childhood.

Of the 15, 7 entered Safe Passage in preschool; 4 in first grade, 1 in second grade, 2 in fourth grade and 1 in fifth grade. Ten have one or more sisters and brothers also enrolled in Safe Passage.

At the time of the interviews, 3 had graduated from high school. Of the remaining 12, 6 were enrolled in two-year programs and 6 in three-year programs, with 7 scheduled to graduate in November 2024. All three graduates are employed; two are working with CEMACO¹⁵ and one is an apprentice at Safe Passage.

All reported experiencing an adjustment upon entering the Diversified Institute in which they were enrolled. They pointed out that classes were larger than they had been used to at Safe Passage until the end of the ninth grade. At the beginning of the year, some said they felt isolated, and some observed that they were frightened, because they did not know any of the other students.

For most, the experience was positive: they adapted quickly to being in a larger school and quickly made friends.¹⁶ Most, with a few exceptions, were satisfied with their teachers and the education they received.

All but one said they were well prepared thanks to their experience with Safe Passage.¹⁷

A common theme in the interviews was the disruption caused by COVID, which caused several to initially lower their grades, which was quickly resolved.

All, without exception, have fond memories of their years as students enrolled at Safe Passage. Common themes include the warm welcome, the caring and loving environment, the efforts to increase their self-esteem and the help they received when they had problems.

In the words of three of the young people interviewed:

Berenice entered as a preschooler.

I am shy, I was nervous, a new school, not sure if I was going to adapt to the environment. I found that the teachers helped me get my bearings. I made several friends. It was a very nice welcome. They treated me very well. It’s an environment where you felt credible. We had the support

Rosmery entered in first grade

All good. I was president of my class, first president of the school. I thanked donors. I went to talks. All the teachers were nice to me. I wanted to learn with them. I always keep in touch with these teachers.

Richard also entered first grade

When I came in, the staff made me feel comfortable. I made friends who I continue to have. The teaching method is very different from the school I attended, more organized. You can tell the staff like what they do, and they do it with dedication.

15 CEMACO is a chain of stores throughout Guatemala that offer a wide variety of products and services designed for the home through in-store and online shopping. Wayfair and Home Depot , in the United States, offer similar products and services.

16 Susanna Place, former chair of the Safe Passage Board of Directors and long-time Safe Passage supporter, wanted to know if the 15 people interviewed experienced any limitations/challenges when entering their vocational high school.

17 Patricia Barneond, Senior Director of Education at Safe Passage and Principal of Hanley Denning Experimental School, wants to know if Oportunidades and Safe Passage helped in the transition to a vocational high school.

FOCUSING ON THEIR EXPERIENCE IN OPORTUNIDADES AND PRÓXIMO PASO

Oportunidades

While material support provided (tuition assistance, transportation to and from the Institute where they are enrolled, equipment needed depending on what they are studying, meals when they come two or three times a week) was welcome and necessary; the 15 students interviewed had very positive things to say about the help they receive from the staff the two or three times a week they spend a morning or afternoon at Oportunidades.

- Alan Álvarez, head of technology, received very positive comments.
- Several students went to Jenifer Ortega, the psychologist assigned to Oportunidades and thanked her for her help.
- Marvin Apén, who comes in five times a week to help struggling students with their math and science homework, also received high marks.

All regret that English language training, one of the components of the Oportunidades program, is not being delivered as planned.

Although Marvin's help is much appreciated, several students interviewed indicated that they would like to have more of his time (Marvin comes 5 times during the work week including Saturdays for a few hours). One student studying accounting volunteered that Marvin is not prepared to help them with the problems they encounter in their accounting assignments.

When asked what else was missing/what could be improved, most students indicated that, other than the above, nothing. One student asked for more books in the library. Another asked for time for sports.

In their words:

Technology training provided by Alan Alvarez:

Jose Manuel: Alan is very good, excellent, if I don't understand he explains, takes time. He very attentive to you.

Wilmer: Alan taught us several things, we focused on the programs, how to build a computer, he was very animated as a teacher.

Alexandra: Alan taught us platforms to work on, projects, how to look for information, how to develop a project to present to parents. We made groups to decide what we were going to present, and we made posters of what we were learning.

Therapeutic assistance provided by Jenifer Ortega:

Berenice: I am receiving therapy from Jenifer. It has helped me a lot. Although I have developed well, there are always things that affect me. Jenifer helps me to see things from a positive perspective. Her words have encouraged me. She helps me to appreciate the value I have.

Cristian: Jenifer has helped me with feelings, problems at home, my studies. She is good.

Jose Manuel: Jenifer is very pretty, she is like a friend, with her I could talk.

Mathematics and science tutoring taught by Marvin Aponte

Majo: I come when I need help, Marvin explains things to us very well.

Jose Manuel: Marvin takes his time, he explains well.

Rosmary: Sometimes I get lost, Marvin helps me, he guides me, he helps me interpret and understand some of my assignments.

English

When Oportunidades was designed, English was to be an important component. There was an attempt, through volunteers (both in person and remotely) to teach English. However, it was not successful. The full-time volunteer in charge of teaching the classes had to return to the US. During COVID, it turned out to be very complicated to provide classes at a distance from part time volunteers not living in Guatemala due to challenges connecting the students via internet from either their homes or a nearby internet cafe. To this day it has been difficult to find volunteers available on a consistent basis to provide training in English virtually.

The students interviewed unanimously stated how important it is for them to learn English:

Angeli: It is too important. It is the basis of my career.

Juan Fernando: It is fundamental, essential. It helps me in my studies. If I want to travel I wouldn't know how to communicate.

Lester: It is too important to know English for future jobs, to aspire to something big, with English I can travel to other countries.

Jose Manuel: It is quite important for me in specializing in my career, there are many terms in English. It opens doors.

Próximo Paso

Próximo Paso, as described in Section 1, begins in seventh grade and extends through the years spent in Oportunidades and, when possible, beyond once they graduate and enter the workforce or enter one of Guatemala's universities.

It includes a sequence of workshops calibrated by grade; the application of psycho-pedagogical tests in ninth grade that identify three career possibilities from which students can choose; and, as they near graduation from the professional baccalaureate, individualized assistance that helps them look for jobs or prepare for university entrance. Jayro Barahona, head of Próximo Paso, has worked to develop relationships with companies that arrange summer jobs that can lead to employment. He also helps students gain work experience through internships at Safe Passage.

Many of the themes of the workshops are listed in Section I. They are reflected in the testimonies of seven students and former students below. Also reflected are the commitment and dedication of Jayro Barahona, in charge of Próximo Paso, and Mario Chamorro, who runs Oportunidades and Próximo Paso and, when necessary, steps in to help Jayro.

Alexandra: They support us to make decisions as adults, to change from studying to working formally, to explore college,

Berenice: The workshops, the last one on awareness of how to choose a job, a career. Jayro helps to make good decisions. He has helped me apply to college for a scholarship.

Majo: This year Jayro helped me with my CV, to prepare letter to apply for internships, to prepare for university entrance exams.¹⁸

Richard: It helps us develop skills, teaches us different things about employment, values, skills in different areas.

Rosmery: Mario is very kind and nice. I wanted to change careers, and he helped me. He called, made an appointment, talked about my case, stayed pending, asked me how I was

¹⁸ The author found out, as she was finalizing this report, that Majo had just been accepted at the San Carlos University to study Architecture.

doing, kept me pending.

Wilmer: Jayro helped me get a summer job as a “vacacionista”, he helped me fix the paperwork. CEMACO gave me a job.

Jose Luis: Last year we had socialization classes. We saw the importance of self-confidence.

IMPACTS

What do the interviewees aspire to do in their lives?

When asked what they aspire to in their lives, 11 of the 15 respondents indicated that, immediately after finishing public high school or when they had enough money, they wanted to go to a university.

Three volunteered that they wanted to be psychologists; two aspire to be architects; two want to apply their knowledge as electricians or electrical engineers (one as a university professor and one by setting up his own business). One indicated that he wanted to be a lawyer or go into communications. Another indicated that she would like to be a dentist or go into administration. A third indicated that he wanted to obtain two University of San Carlos degrees: one in systems engineering and one in agronomy.

In the words of three interviewees¹⁹ :

Alexandra: I want to establish a foundation like Safe Passage in Departments around Guatemala City. I see that there are people who want to help other people, work with low-income kids, help visualize.

Berenice: I want to be a psychologist to help children in need. A woman’s contribution to society, the fact that she is a woman does not take anything away, she has the potential to be part of society and contribute to the common good. When I grow up I would like to create something so that people become aware of the importance of mental health. I also want to improve my family’s life. My mom is always supporting me, and I want to support her and my siblings.

Lester: I want to finish my undergraduate degree and then go to college to study systems engineering. I also want to get a university degree in agronomy. I want to live in the countryside with a ranch of many hectares where I plant corn and other crops. I also want to be a meat supplier. With my knowledge of technology, I can sell my crops and create other businesses. I want my mom to be proud of me.

Impact of Safe Passage, Oportunidades and Próximo Pasos on their lives.

Each interviewee was asked two questions:

1. How has your overall experience at Safe Passage influenced your lives?
2. How have your experiences with Oportunidades and Próximo Paso influenced your lives?

It is clear from the testimonies below that their time at Safe Passage through ninth grade, and their subsequent experience participating in Oportunidades and receiving assistance through Próximo Paso, have had a significant influence on the lives of several interviewees.

Impacts of Safe Passage

Alexandra: Safe Passage formed my character, how to express myself.

Cristian: I can go out as a teacher, doctor, various. I can go to town to teach other young people.

¹⁹ It should be noted that both Alexandra and Berenice aspire in their careers to help others.

Lester: It makes you feel that you are an important person, proud of yourself. It opens up a lot of vision, that you grow as a person.

Richard: It helped me to develop social skills, it helps us to open doors.

Oportunidades and Próximo Pasos

Angeli: It helped shape me.

José Luis: It is the backbone of everything; part of everything I am.

Marvin: I am more prepared for what I can and cannot do.

Rosmery: They have given me confidence in myself.

Melany: It gives me the inspiration to continue.

Their values and how they are applied

This theme, suggested by Oportunidades and Próximo Paso Director Mario Chamorro, has great significance: from the time children enter Safe Passage through 9th grade, and when they graduate.²⁰ Six values are woven into everything they do, whether in the classroom, during recess, while doing projects. In fact, on a monthly basis, children in each classroom receive, on a rotating basis, certificates and awards for exemplifying one of the values.

The emphasis on giving high priority to values, and applying them, continues during the time affiliates are enrolled in Oportunidades and are receiving support through Próximo Paso.

For these reasons answers to questions about their values and how they apply them in their daily life should not be surprising.

The following is a list of the frequency with which specific values were mentioned

Frequently mentioned values

<i>Respect</i>	10	<i>(In blue: the 6 values of Safe Passage)</i>
<i>Honesty</i>	10	
<i>Love/kindness</i>	7	
<i>Working as a Team</i>	5	
<i>Responsibility</i>	5	
<i>Trust</i>	3	
Empathy	2	
Perseverance	1	
Punctuality	1	

²⁰ Comprehensive training in values of students begins when they enter the Early Stimulation Center and continues throughout their education at the Pre-primary, Primary and Secondary levels in the Basic Cycle, since these are the basis of school culture. They are integrated into what happens in the classroom. Each is studied in depth in the daily moments of Crew, which are the spaces of socio-emotional training, where the concept of each one and the way in which life is lived in the different spaces of school, family and social life is worked on, following a planning adapted to the different ages. Based on this, each month a student from each grade who has stood out in the experience of the value worked on is selected to be recognized by the educational community.

Three students describe how they apply their values:

Alexandra: Respect, be kind to volunteers and peers, communicate more, be friendly, be confident to talk to teachers, work as a team. Be empathetic; talk to anyone who needs help. I have put them into practice at school with some of the shyer students, taking the initiative to talk to them, talking to volunteers.

Berenice: Honesty: not only at home but also in my studies, with the people with whom I relate, when there are problems, not to be a gossip.

Love: I am one that likes to carry out acts of fraternity with people, I try to be good with them. I always try to do things with love and because I want to, and I do it with great pleasure.

Confidence: It was difficult for me to trust myself. Now I have confidence in myself. I have started to say I have the ability.

Lester: Responsibility: can be applied to each side, be a better person.

Honesty: I am very reliable.

Love and teamwork: living together and working as a team, solving problems.

Being a leader

Erin Mooney, Executive Director of Safe Passage, requested that a leadership question be included in the interview protocol. The following is a sample of the interviewees' responses to the question on leadership.

When asked this question, six of the 15 people interviewed proudly stated that they had held leadership positions, including: being the President of their class at Safe Passage, being the President of the Hanley Denning Experimental School, being the President of their class at the public high school they attend, being the President of the Student Council at their public high school..

Three testimonies stand out:

Lester: I have learned that we are all born leaders, the important thing is to develop our leadership. A positive leader supports his colleagues, helps them to do their work in the best way. You lead from behind, you are not on top, you serve as a guide. I try to be a leader and a follower

Wilmer: In my job I try to guide the group, to be an example for them, to have the right values, to listen to what they say, to guide them along the way.

Berenice: In fights and conflicts, I try to maintain fairness, not to give an opinion before seeing what is happening, to know if it is not in my capacity. I must be the example.

What would you tell a donor?

The author ended each interview by asking each person to imagine they were a donor visiting Safe Passage. "I have been a donor for a while and am in the process of deciding where to place the funds I have to help the programs I value."

She asked each interviewee two questions:

1. Why should I support Safe Passage?
2. How has my financial support affected your life?

The author was impressed by the many thoughtful responses she received. Of particular note are those listed below:

Alexandra: We are people of change.

Angeli: Your help would be enough for us, since more generations are coming, I don't think of myself, I have my brothers, I want them to receive what I received.

Cristian: Thanks to you I have had education, teaching and the desire to teach other young people, you have helped my family financially, I have had school supplies, uniforms, I want to thank you.

Erick: You make possible the dreams of many people. What you propose, we harvest, we prepare ourselves, we have the capacity to opt for any future.

Lester: I have grown, I have been able to overcome as a person, at some point I will be a donor.

Rosmery: We were taught values and how to use them.

Richard: To be able to have well-analyzed goals, we have acquired good skills and values. So, I can have better opportunities.

III.

ENVISIONING PRÓXIMO PASO AND OPORTUNIDADES OVER THE COMING YEARS



Melany is one of the first three Oportunidades affiliates to graduate in 2023. She is currently an apprentice with Oportunidades and just received a scholarship to study dentistry.

Section I of this report provides the reader with an overview of Oportunidades and Próximo Paso. It begins with a timeline describing the birth and evolution of each program, followed by a portrait of each program in 2024, at the time the author conducted the study. Section II shares findings from interviews conducted with 15 youth: 12 currently participating in Oportunidades and 3 graduates, with a heavy reliance on testimonials that speak for themselves.

Readers will find, in the testimonies, many demonstrations of how the participants have been influenced and shaped by their experiences attending the Hanley Denning Experimental School through ninth grade. They will also be able to see, through testimonies focused on their experiences participating in the Opportunity and Próximo Paso Programs, the impact these programs are having on the vision they have of themselves and what they aspire to.

While this is promising, it is important for the reader to understand that much remains to be done as each program matures.

Moving forward depends on many factors, including: the learning curve that accompanies programs that start from scratch; the availability of the resources needed to achieve the program's objectives; and hard work and commitment.

As the author neared the end of her time in Guatemala, learning more and more each day about Oportunidades and Próximo Paso as well as their impacts, it occurred to her that readers might benefit from visualizing an extension of the timeline into the future through the eyes of those responsible for creating and nurturing both programs.

Before leaving Guatemala, the author left Mario Chamorro, Paola Vasquez and Jayro Barahona with a task: pool their ideas and prepare their vision of where they see Oportunidades and Próximo Paso going over the next few years, and the steps needed to fulfill their vision.

This is what they provided:

VISION FOR PROGRAM OPORTUNIDADES AND PRÓXIMO PASO

Mario Chamorro, Paola Vásquez and Jayro Barahona selected a five-year vision covering both programs, from 2025 to 2030.

By 2030 they foresee two complementary programs that together:

- Help ensure that affiliates and former affiliates become successful adults: people who are self-confident, who are able to face challenges with determination, who possess and apply values that enhance their abilities to have favorable results in their professional and work careers, at home with their families and in their communities.
- Prepare affiliates with the development of soft skills, knowledge and aptitudes necessary to be successful in the labor market; understanding by success: the ability to perform in any work and academic environment, as well as to be productive in their life and their community.
- Provide affiliates, who aspire to continue their learning and specialization after graduating from the Diversified Institutes, with the guidance and means they need to: choose what they would like to continue to specialize in; where they would like to pursue as their major (at the university or other technical program); prepare applications that will result in their acceptance into the program of their choice; and obtain the necessary resources to cover tuition and academic costs.

- Guide parents, most of whom never had the opportunity their children are having, to provide needed support to their child at home and help their teens and young adults meet their career and personal goals.

REQUIRED ACTIONS:

In the coming years, several elements will be necessary to achieve this vision:

- Financial resources to hire more personnel and strengthen the staff with the necessary training to care for the affiliates.
- Additional financial resources to have a scholarship plan to support Oportunidades graduates in covering tuition costs at universities and specialized technical programs.
- Identify technology certifications to strengthen the résumé of program participants and provide the necessary training to pass them.
- Strengthen monitoring, registration and database resources as tools to evaluate progress in meeting the objectives.
- Creativity and commitment on the part of the management and staff of Oportunidades y Próximo Paso to make the above a reality.

2025

Oportunidades:

- Hire a full-time teacher to provide English language training to affiliates.
- Hire a full-time tutor to provide tutoring in numerical, science, and in accounting.
- Implement workshops for parents to accompany and help their children in their transition to adulthood in a more sophisticated and technical world.

Próximo Paso:

- Strengthen the department for job orientation, providing tools to facilitate the job search process, training and training alternatives.
- Hire an employment counselor to support the coordination of the program so as not to neglect vocational and academic orientation.
- Expand the capacity to hire apprentices at the Safe Passage campus to strengthen the program.

2026

Oportunidades

- Acquire updated technological resources (computers, systems, software).
- Obtain formal, market-recognized technology certifications (e.g. Microsoft Excel certification, programming) and prepare affiliates for any type of technology assessment.

Próximo Paso

- Specifically define the two work areas of the program (Vocational Guidance and Job Orientation).
- Establish partnerships with entities that can provide scholarships to graduates with the support of the Oportunidades program.
- Expand the number of companies receiving vacationers, the number of members participating in the vacationers'

program and in permanent positions, and have more members selected for full-time employment with their companies.

2027

Oportunidades

- Assess technological and linguistic skills (in English) to members to ensure knowledge acquisition.
- Strengthen and evaluate the technical skills of employees (certificates in accordance with their expertise).

Próximo Paso

- Establish links with companies that facilitate training and technification in their areas of expertise, so that the trained population becomes a recruitable human resource.

2028 and 2029

- Carry out the two programs implementing enhancements made in prior years.

2030

- Carry out a complete evaluation of the two programs and based on the results of the evaluation, make the necessary adjustments verifying the performance of both programs.

IV.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This final section of the report is based on what the author learned while conducting this study using the following sources:

- Interviews conducted between July 1 and 12 with 12 Safe Passage affiliates enrolled in Oportunidades and Próximo Paso while they complete their specialized trade studies at institutes in Guatemala City, and with 3 former affiliates, or graduates, who continue to be followed up through Próximo Paso.
- Review of documentation provided to the author, focusing on be® Paso and Oportunidades.
- Extensive interviews with personnel involved in the implementation of both programs.
- Observation during activities carried out during the time she was in Guatemala.

CONCLUSIONS

From interviews with the 15 affiliates and graduates



Oportunidades affiliates in July 2024

When Safe Passage began in 1999, almost all of the students came from families working at the largest garbage dump in Central America, located in Zone 3 of Guatemala City.

Over the years, the profile of families has evolved. Although some still have parents who earn their living in the garbage dump (this was the case with three mothers and three fathers of the 15 students interviewed), the majority earn their living working in the informal sector.

Among the 15 students interviewed, mothers, who were not at home, earned a living cleaning house. The fathers, who were still members of the household, worked in nearby maquilas or otherwise earned a living doing day-to-day activities.¹

Seven of the 15 youth report facing multiple problems at home: not enough food to feed all family members; having to care for siblings while their parents' work; parents can be abusive (especially when unemployed and drinking); sometimes having to earn money to help care for their families at the expense of their schoolwork. Ten report living in zones 3 and 7, near the garbage dump, in neighborhoods with high levels of crime, with increased infiltration of Guatemalan and, more recently, Salvadoran gangs.

A particular challenge faced by some of these young people, as they graduate and enter the job market, is rejection by potential employers, who often view them as gang-related or dangerous because of where they live.

1. Instilling confidence and hope

Expressions of confidence and hope were two themes that came up frequently in the interviews, both in what the youth said and in their facial expressions. The seeds of both are planted from the time students enter Safe Passage in preschool through ninth grade when they graduate from Basic Cycle and are reinforced when students enroll in Oportunidades.

Two responses from the youth interviewed stand out. When the author asked about the impact of Safe Passage in general

¹ Data from the 66 affiliates enrolled in Oportunidades in 2024 (data collected by José Caracún), from which the 15 interviewees were extracted, reveal the following:

- 66 participants live in families whose monthly income is below the poverty line (40 of them live in extreme poverty).
- 20 families earn their income from work related to the landfill site
- nearly half (32) have parents working in the informal sector
- the vast majority (57) come from families living in zones 3 (where the landfill is located) or 7, next to the landfill.
- almost half (30) come from single-parent families.

and Próximo Paso and Oportunidades on their lives, Marvin said “I am more prepared for what may and may not come” . Melany responded, “It gives me the inspiration to keep going.”

2. Preparing for success in adulthood

The workshops provided through Próximo Paso, along with Jayro Barahona’s direct assistance to students from the time they graduate from ninth grade and begin attending public high schools, are designed to prepare young people for the time when they move into adulthood: as individuals in their daily lives and in the workplace. Oportunidades is designed to complement what students learn in their vocational high school by providing them with basic computer technology skills and the ability to speak English, both of which are useful regardless of what they choose to do in their lives.

The testimonies of Alexandra, Richard and José talk about this topic: “They help us to make decisions as adults, to change from studying to formal work, exploring university” (Alexandra); “It helps us to develop skills, teaches us different things about employment, values, skills in different areas” (Richard); “Jayro has helped me to look for a job, with the process of paperwork, it makes me feel more adult” (José Manuel).

3. Most aspire to go to university and embark on professional careers

When asked what they aspired to in life, 11 of the 15 young people interviewed indicated that, immediately after finishing high school or when they had enough money, they wanted to go to college.

Three volunteered that they wanted to study to be psychologists; two aspire to be architects; two want to apply their knowledge as electrical engineers (one as a university professor and one by setting up his own business). One indicated that he wanted to be a lawyer or go into communications. Another indicated that she would like to be a dentist or go into administration. A third indicated that he wanted to obtain two university degrees: one in systems engineering and one in agronomy.

Lester has given a lot of thought to what he would like to do with his professional life: “I want to finish my degree and then go to university to study systems engineering. I also want to get a degree in agronomy. I want to live in the countryside with a ranch of many hectares where I grow corn and other crops. I also want to be a meat supplier. With my knowledge of technology I can sell my crops, create other businesses.”

The author has just received news that Majo, interviewed for this study, has been accepted to the University of San Carlos of Guatemala, one of the best universities in Guatemala, to study architecture. Melany has received a scholarship to study dentistry.

4. The importance of living your own values

From the moment students enter Safe Passage, whether in preschool or the early grades, six key values are woven into what students learn and how they are expected to interact with each other.² The emphasis on applying these values continues as students graduate from Basic Cycle, enter Oportunidades, and continue to receive support through Próximo Paso.

The author could not help but be impressed, when she asked the students interviewed about values, that several responded with the conviction that many of the values they have been exposed to since entering Safe Passage define the way they live their daily lives.

Although these values are addressed in a specific question that is included in the interview protocol, the values enter the conversation throughout the interviews:

When asked how Próximo Paso has helped him in his life, Richard replied “It helps us develop skills, teaches us different things about employment, values, skills in different areas.”

2 These values are: Respect, Honesty, Love/kindness, Teamwork, Responsibility and Trust.

When asked how her time at Safe Passage has influenced her life, Melany responded with two words: “It has given me moral values.”

Berenice, when asked how she applies the values she has learned in Safe Passage, and which have been reinforced in Próximo Paso and Oportunidades, responded:

“I practice honesty: not only at home but also in my studies, with the people with whom I relate, when there are problems, not to be gossipy...

“I am one who wants to do acts of fraternity with people, to be good to them. I always try to do things with love and because I want to. I apply it with my colleagues, I do it with pleasure.

5. Preparing to become future leaders

Leadership is encouraged from the time children enter Safe Passage in preschool and early grades. From the beginning, the children in each grade vote on who will be the president of their class. Students vote for elementary and middle school president, vice president, secretary and treasurer. When they move on to the public highschools, the students vote for class and school leaders.

Six of the 15 young people interviewed proudly shared with the author the leadership roles they have assumed: as class president and school president at Safe Passage and while attending vocational training institutes.

In the words of Lester, Wilmer and Berenice:

Lester: I have learned that we are all born leaders, the important thing is to develop them. A positive leader supports his colleagues, helps them to do their work better. You lead from behind, you are not on top, you serve as a guide. I try to be a leader and a follower

Wilmer: In my work I try to guide the group, to be an example for them, to have the right values, to listen to what they say, to guide them along the way.

Berenice: In fights and conflicts, I try to maintain fairness, not to give an opinion before seeing what is happening, to know if it is not in my capacity. I must be the example.

6. The thoughtful way they responded to the question: What would they say to donors to convince them that their investment in Safe Passage is worthwhile?

This was a question added on a whim by the author. She was struck by the thoughtful responses of the interviewees to a question they clearly had not anticipated or probably had never thought about:

Alexandra: We are people of change.

Angeli: Your help would be enough for us, since more generations are coming, I don't think of myself, I have my brothers, I want them to receive what I received.

Cristian: Thanks to you I have had education, teaching and the desire to teach other young people, you have helped my family financially, I have had school supplies, uniforms, I want to thank you.

Eric: You make possible the dreams of many people. What you propose, we harvest them, we prepare ourselves, we have the capacity to opt for any future.

Lester: I have grown up, I have been able to overcome as a person, at some point I will be a donor.

In relation to Próximo Paso and Oportunidades personnel

1. Dedicated and committed staff

The author cannot not fail to highlight the dedication and commitment of all the personnel who make Próximo Paso y Oportunidades a reality.

These observations come from observation of staff in action during the two weeks they were there, from several individual interviews with Próximo Paso and Oportunidades staff, and from interviews with the 15 youth.

As reflected in the interviews with Rosmery, Majo and Berenice:

Rosmery: Mario is very kind and nice. I wanted to change careers, and he helped me. He called, made an appointment, talked about my case, stayed pending, asked me how I was doing, kept me pending.

Majo: This year Jayro helped me with my CV, letter to apply for internships, prepare for university entrance exams.

Bernice: I am receiving therapy from Jennifer. It has helped me a lot. Even though I have developed well, there are always things that affect me. Jennifer helps me to see things from a positive perspective. Her words have encouraged me. She helps me to know the value I have.

2 Strength comes from evolving and perfecting oneself, learning from both one's mistakes as well as one's successes

Both Próximo Paso and Oportunidades, as the author found when she visited Safe Passage in 2024, are the culmination of efforts that began in 2015 and 2017, respectively, to establish promising programs, striving year after year to make each more effective and relevant to the needs of the target populations.

This evolution is reflected in Section 1, where the author traces the birth and evolution of both programs. It is also reflected in Section 3, where Mario, Paola, and Jayro set out their vision for the next five years.

What the author has learned, after leading many USAID program evaluation teams over a number of years, is that successful programs are those that constantly improve, learning from both their successes and their mistakes or failures. Those that do not learn from their mistakes and failures and keep repeating them tend to stagnate.

3. A vision and commitment that goes beyond the graduation of Oportunidades students.

Since they started Próximo Paso and Oportunidades, in 2015 and 2019, those responsible for both programs had, as goals, to prepare students for success in their daily lives and in whatever occupation or profession they decide to pursue.

Achieving this takes time. It requires adequate staffing. And it requires adequate resources: time, staffing and resources to get students through the vocational baccalaureate and graduate with the support of Oportunidades and Próximo Paso:

- time, personnel and resources to establish links with companies willing to host students for vacation internships that, in several cases, lead to full-time job offers.
- time, staff and resources to prepare to help students enroll in universities and track their progress.

When the author visited Guatemala in early July 2024, both programs were making progress toward achieving this vision.

Jayro Barahona, working on his own and with Mario's support, has managed to establish formal agreements with seven companies to accept vocational high school seniors (or recent graduates) for summer vacationer programs that can lead to full-time job offers.³ Jayro has also been able to establish a database that is kept up to date and provides information on the professions that graduates have taken up and, for those who choose to continue their studies after graduating from high school, to enroll in a university.

Mario, working with the staff of Oportunidades—a relatively new program that was established in 2019 and went into effect in 2020 and for the first time produced graduates in 2023—has made progress in establishing an information technology program from which students can earn up to four or five certificates before leaving Oportunidades. He has hired a clinical psychologist who is available to help students address the challenges they face. And he has planned to provide a part-time tutor to help students with difficult math and science homework (this part-time person should ideally be available on a full-time basis). Due to lack of funding, it has not been possible to create a full-time position for an English teacher.

In Section III, Mario, Jayro, and Paola (at the author's request) lay out their vision of what they would like to accomplish to achieve this vision.

³ As can be seen in Section II. of this report, two of the three graduates interviewed (both participants in the vacation plan) now have full-time jobs at CEMACO.

This brings us back to the starting point of this last section: the need for adequate time, personnel and resources and, with them, the recommendations listed below.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The author, as she does with all of her studies, arrived in Guatemala without any preconceived ideas. Her mission was to assess the impacts of Safe Passage's Oportunidades and Próximo Paso programs, based on a sample of 15 young people: 12 affiliates studying at public highschools while attending Oportunidades two or three times a week; and three graduates who have full-time jobs.

To do this, she took two steps:

- Developed — in consultation with Oportunidades and Próximo Paso staff, the leadership of Safe Passage, and members of the Board of Directors — an interview protocol that incorporated the information they were interested in receiving and, using this protocol, interviewed 12 affiliates currently enrolled in Oportunidades and 3 who have recently graduated.
- In order to have a basis for understanding the information (testimonies she received from the interviews, she did everything she could (within a limited time) to learn about Oportunidades and Próximo Paso — through documentation review, in-depth interviews with staff, and when possible, observation of events.

As is evident from the results of the interviews presented in Section 2, it appears that both programs are having a positive impact on participants.

The author concludes this study with two recommendations:

Continue strengthening support to both programs over the coming years by: (a) hiring the necessary personnel to reinforce both programs; (b) reinforcing the capacity of existing personnel; (c) updating technological resources and equipment; (d) obtaining scholarships for graduates who wish to continue their studies at a university or specialized institution.

Donors and those interested in the possibility of supporting one or both programs should contact Safe Passage's Director of Development⁴ to explore opportunities to connect their interests with the most current needs of the programs and organization.

4 rachel@safepassage.org (207) 292-2130

END NOTE

As the author was putting the finishing touches on this study, Mario Chamorro informed her that within the last month two 2023 Oportunidades graduates and two who are in their final year of Oportunidades – all four interviewed by the author for the study – were either accepted to a university or had received a scholarship

Oportunidades class of 2023⁵

- Melany, currently serving as an Apprentice with Safe Passage assigned to Oportunidades, just found out that she had received a scholarship to study dentistry
- Wilmer, currently working at CEMACO, received scholarship to study psychology

Oportunidades class of 2024

- Majo was accepted at the University of San Carlos in Guatemala
- Berenice received a scholarship to study psychology

Of the five other Oportunidades affiliates scheduled to graduate this year:

- Two have applied to universities and are awaiting to see if they are accepted.
- Two are in the process of finding employment

An impressive start that Oportunidades and Proximo Paso staff have every reason to be proud of!

At the beginning of October (two and a half months after returning from Guatemala in mid-July), as the author was putting the finishing touches on this report, she received promising news:

- Three of the fifteen youth that she interviewed in early July (two who graduated in 2023 from Oportunidades and were working and one about to graduate in November of 2024) had just received scholarships to study at the university level: two in psychology and one in dentistry.
- A fourth, about to graduate in November of 2024, has been accepted at the prestigious San Carlos University of Guatemala and is hoping to get financing to cover her expenses.
- Of the five remaining youth who will be graduating in November of this year, two have applied to study at the university level and two have applied for jobs, are waiting to hear whether their applications have been accepted.

An auspicious start, showing that Oportunidades and Proximo Paso are on the road to achieving their objectives.

5 It is worth noting that all three of the graduates of the Oportunidades class of 2023, upon graduating, had jobs: two at CEMACO and one at Safe Passage

ANNEX A

PROTOCOL FOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS WITH PARTICIPANTS IN/LEAVERS OF OPORTUNIDADES

In blue: Recommendations from Erin Mooney, Patricia Baumand, Rachel Meyn Ugarte, Jessica Britt, Susanna Place, Ana Cristina Botrán, and Esther Brol.

TO START

- Marcia asks if you have read the written guidance on the interview, summarizing the main points.
- Ask, before you begin, if you have any questions/concerns you would like to share.

INTERVIEW

Background/baseline information

1. Tell me about yourself

- *Where you were born and raised*
- *If on/by the dumpster, like your life*
- *Family members,*
- *Significant events in your life that you would like to make known.*

2. When did you start (and to what degree) in Safe Passage?

3. What memories do you have of your time at Safe Passage until you completed the basic cycle?

- *What did you learn?*
- *What did you like?*
- *What didn't you like?*

4. How did you come to the decision of the career you are studying at the diversified level?

5. What school do you currently attend?

6. What has been your experience in switching to the diversified level?

- *Location/distance from home*
- *How it comes and goes*
- *Number of students,*
- *What students are like,*

7(a) FOR THOSE IN DIVERSIFIED How did you do when you started the diversified cycle?

- *Do you feel I was adequately prepared (Patricia)?*
- *How were you received and treated by your peers and teachers?*
- *Achievements/challenges during the beginning of the diversification program*

7(b) FOR BOTH GRADUATES: What are you doing now?

- *Type of part-time/full-time work*
- *Attends higher education*

About your experience with Oportunidades and Próximo Paso

1. Tell me about the Opportunity program you participated in while in the diversified cycle.

- How many times a week do you come/do you come to Oportunidades?
- What does/did you do when he/she came?
- To what extent did the Oportunidades program help you in the transition to an outside school? (Patricia)
- Did you encounter any limitations/challenges (Susanna)?
- Was there anything missing that would have helped in your transition to a diversified cycle?

2. What comments do you have about Próximo Paso?

- How did you decide on the career you are studying?
- The career in which you studied has helped you in your life and how (FOR GRADUATES)
- What aspects of Próximo Paso do you like/like,
- Are/were there things missing/would have liked?
- If there were another type of training, what would it be (e.g. other careers)?

On the impact that Oportunidades/Próximo Paso has left on the interviewed person

1. What are your aspirations/dreams?

(A dream he always had)

(A dream that came about while I was in the Safe Passage/Oportunidades program.)

2. If someone were to ask you, how did your experience with Oportunidades/Próximo Paso impact or affect your life so far, what would you say?

- Can you give me an example (Rachel)

3. What has been the most useful thing you have learned from Safe Passage that has helped you to better integrate into this new world? (Esther)

4. What values have you learned at Oportunidades y Próximo Paso, what have you put into practice in your personal, family and community life?

(Note: leaves answer open. If it does not say anything refer to the listings below.)

- Love
- Honesty
- Teamwork
- Responsibility
- Trust

5. How have you benefited or not benefited from Oportunidades and Próximo Paso (Erin)?

- What will be useful for the future?
- Is there anything you want more of in these programs?
- Anything you want less?

6. Do you consider yourself a leader in the spaces in which you operate (school/community)? (Erin)

Additional topics

1. When Safe Passage approaches donors for support, what would you like them to say, based on your experience with Oportunidades, Próximo Paso?
2. What recommendations do you have for Safe Passage on improvements they could make?
3. Is there anything else you would like to share?

CLOSING OF THE INTERVIEW

- Marcy thanks the interviewee for her time and valuable comments/recommendations.
- Indicates that if you include testimony in the interviewee's report you would need to obtain approval from the interviewee first.
- Commitment that they will receive a report that they can share with family, colleagues, friends.

ANNEX B

INDIVIDUALS INTERVIEWED

Safe Passage Staff

Erin Mooney – Executive Director	Michal Kosta
Patricia Barneond – Senior Director of Education	Rachel Kosta
Pablo Callejas – Associate Director	Members and former members of Oportunidades
Karla Subuyuj – Director of Fundraising and Communications	Alexandra, 4th year student
Rachel Meyn Ugarte – Director of Development	Angeli, graduating in 2024
Jessie Dill Jacobs – Former Director of Development	Bernice, graduating 2024
Mario Chamorro – Director, Oportunidades and Próximo Paso	Cristian, graduating 2024
Paola Keyla Vásquez – Administrative and Educational Assistant of the Oportunidades Program	Erick, 4th year student
Jayro Barahona – Próximo Paso Program Coordinator	Jose Luis, former affiliate, graduated 2023
Alan Álvarez – Technology Teacher	José Manuel , former member, graduated in 2023
Marvin Apén – Numerical and Scientific Area Tutor	Juan Fernando, 5th year student
José Caracún – Social Work Coordinator	Lester, 4th year students
Jenifer Ortega – Clinical Psychologist at Oportunidades	Richard, 4th year student
Melany Taqué – Apprentice of Oportunidades (Graduate 2023)	Rosmery, 4th year students
Members of the Board of Directors of Safe Passage	María José, graduating in 2024
Jessica Britt, President	Marvin, graduating in 2024
Susanna Place – Former Board Member	Melany, graduated in 2024
Cristina Rojas Botran	Wilmer, a former affiliate, graduated in 2023
Esther Brohl	Mothers of Oportunidades affiliates
Donors	Blanca Toh
	Norma Martinez

ANNEX C

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marcia Bernbaum, PhD is an experienced applied researcher and program evaluator. During her career as a staff member of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), she designed and supervised the conduct of numerous program evaluations. Since her retirement from USAID, she has led numerous evaluation teams in Central and South America and East Africa.

Passionate about human rights and social justice, one of Marcia's special loves is conducting in-depth case studies of programs with a human rights/social justice focus that promote leadership and empowerment. The first two were on programs in Peru: the Peruvian Institute for Human Rights Education and Peace (IPEDEPH) and Asociación Civil Transparencia, a program that trained volunteers to observe Peru's tumultuous 2000 presidential election. The third, fourth and fifth were from the Latin American Youth Center and La Clínica del Pueblo, both in Columbia Heights DC, and the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. All, except the Transparencia evaluation/case study, have been carried out on a volunteer basis.

In 2012 Marcia made the decision to stop doing paid consulting and instead focus as a volunteer collaborating with and alongside the underserved in DC. She has collaborated with DC's homeless population and the DC area's immigrant population. She is proud of the advocacy she has done, along with a group of homeless people, for clean and safe public restrooms available to everyone in the neediest areas of DC (for more information on this initiative, visit www.dcpublicrestrooms.org). As of June 2024, Washington DC has 6 clean and safe public restrooms, called Thrones, spread throughout the city.