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Case Study: La Bisutería de la Escuela Especial de Nebaj

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Case Study: La Bisutería de la Escuela Especial de Nebaj



Background

Special Education in Nebaj, Guatemala

In the Ixil Region¹ of Guatemala's Quiché Department, there is social stigma against people with physical, intellectual and developmental disabilities. Parents of children with special needs are often ashamed of their children² and reluctant to take them outside or send them to school. Worldwide, children with disabilities are less likely to attend school, receive academic

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Leah Dunlevy currently reports for Pacific Standard, a California-based news organization that covers social and environmental justice issues. She will graduate from Northwestern University in June 2019 with a double major in Journalism and International Studies. Leah plans to pursue a career in environmental law and policy with an emphasis on environmental justice.

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¹ The Ixil are a Maya people who live in three Guatemalan municipalities: Nebaj, Cotzal, and Chajul.

² Some Ixil people hold a religious belief that the parents of a child with a disability have done something to deserve the curse of a disabled child, which places an extremely negative connotation on disability.

support to attain educational goals, and to experience familial and emotional support that increase quality of life (Kuper et al., 2014; Hauser-Cram et al., 2001). A similar lack of support for children with disabilities in Guatemala³ perpetuates their lack of access to opportunities for academic, social, and professional development, which contributes to stereotypes that people with disabilities cannot make valuable contributions to society.

In 2002, Elena Ceto, Daria Guzmán, and Jacinta Ceto founded *La Escuela Oficial de Educación Especial* (colloquially *La Escuela Especial*)⁴ to address the need for a special education program in the Nebaj municipality (population 23,301⁵). In 2005, Don Langley co-founded Mayan Hope with Jacinta and Daria to provide financial and organizational support for the school, which has since secured contracts for its teachers from the MINEDUC⁶ and serves over 30 students with learning and physical disabilities, of all grades, most of whom return each year. Mayan Hope's ultimate goal is to have the school be entirely sustained by the municipal and national governments. *La Escuela Especial* remains the only one of its kind in the region.

Social Entrepreneur Corps and *Soluciones Comunitarias*

Social Entrepreneur Corps (SEC) sends college students to countries where *Soluciones Comunitarias*⁷ (SolCom) operates⁸ to act as community development and social consulting interns for SolCom partners with a variety of missions and purposes. SolCom offers a multitude of services: training for entrepreneurs to sell eyeglasses, cookstoves, and water filters on the microconsignment model⁹; financial training and support for new savings groups; and community consulting, which is where SEC interns come in.

We were part of a six-person team of SEC interns from the Global Engagement Studies Institute (GESI) at Northwestern University that worked in Nebaj in July and August of 2018. GESI sends students to work with NGOs in six countries each summer, and all students complete coursework prior to departure from the United States aimed at building knowledge of asset-based community development, facilitating group communication, and discussing the implications of development work in our host countries. Upon arrival in Guatemala, our group of SEC interns spent two weeks in Antigua to complete trainings on social consulting methods and to learn about

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³ Encuesta Nacional de Discapacidad, <https://www.ine.gob.gt/index.php/encuestas-de-hogares-y-personas/discapacidad>

⁴ The Official School of Special Education, known colloquially as The Special School

⁵ <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/guatemala-population/cities/> (Cotzal, 11,046; Chajul, 11,657)

⁶ MINEDUC - El Ministerio de Educación (Ministry of Education). Originally, the school did not receive any government funds or support. That has since changed, but they still often lack funds for various supplies.

⁷ Community Solutions

⁸ Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua. www.solucionescomunitarias.com

⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MicroConsignment>

Soluciones Comunitarias. After those two weeks, the six of us departed Antigua for Nebaj, where SolCom was founded and where we began our community development projects in consultation with SolCom partners in the area.

Escuela Especial Introduction

During our first week in Nebaj, SEC supervisor Katie Brickwood introduced our GESI team to Jacinta Ceto Cobo, Director of *La Escuela Especial*. Jacinta, the other teachers at the school, and their partners (Mayan Hope, former SolCom consultants, Domingo Felix¹⁰) are currently working on the following main project development areas:

A new school building: The *escuela*'s current building is rented, and they depend on a donor to pay the rent each month. Although the school functions well in their current space and its adorning murals and decorations give it life, the fact that the school does not own the building produces feelings of insecurity for the teachers. They do not have direct control over the rent payment, and if the rent money were ever to dry up, the school would no longer have a building. Also, the current space, with three classrooms and no extra rooms for program expansion, is smaller than they would like it to be. The 30 or so students fit in the building, but they have to rotate through classroom spaces. When our GESI team arrived in July, the teachers showed us an empty plot of land, which the school owns with their non-profit partner Mayan Hope, on which they planned to construct a new school building with at least four classrooms. At the time of this writing, the new school is under construction.

Infrastructure and program expansion: The new and larger school building will allow the school to expand both its student capacity and its programming. The new building will also include a *taller* (carpentry workshop), a *panadería* (bakery), and an *huerto escolar* (school garden). These new programs will teach students practical skills, which have clear practical benefits as well as benefits related to students' mental and emotional development. For example, students may gain self-confidence through personal achievement.

Fundraising and grants: Working with Mayan Hope, *La Escuela Especial* is raising the funds necessary to pay for the construction of the new school building. They have an online donation portal, and Mayan Hope board members apply for grants. The team currently has four new classrooms fully funded.

La Bisutería (jewelry store): Some students at *La Escuela Especial* make bracelets and earrings, which are sold in *El Descanso*, a restaurant/hostel/travel agency and one of SolCom's

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¹⁰ Domingo Felix, a.k.a. Pap Ku'mu's, is the primary sponsor of *La Escuela Especial* and the owner of the city mall. He pays for the school's rent and the physical therapist that treats the students.

partners. The mission of the *bisutería* is threefold: (1) The students learn beading, a skill they could use to make their own sellable art, (2) The students earn money for completing each bracelet or pair of earrings, and (3) The jewelry shows the community and the students that people with special needs can do valuable work. As a student completes each bracelet, provided that the funds are available, Jacinta pays them Q3¹¹ for beadwork and Q5 if they also attach the clasp. Each bracelet sells for Q35 (earrings cost less and vary in price), and the school makes about Q10-15 from each sale. Before August 2018, Jacinta reported one or two sales each month, though SEC intern groups sometimes bring bulk jewelry orders to the US, where sales are higher.

Public awareness and overcoming stigma against disability: Part of the *escuela*'s mission and one of the goals of Mayan Hope is to fight misconceptions about people with disabilities. There are no specific action items to achieve this mission beyond the *bisutería* and general education, but Jacinta sometimes advocates for the students to appear in public events like parades.

Additionally, Jacinta had identified two projects for which she wanted input from our GESI group: (1) obtaining funds and finalizing plans for the new school building, and (2) improving the jewelry store. Based on team interests, we took on the jewelry store with our third teammate, Jason Kwon. The following table introduces the project team.

Team *Bisutería*

Team Member	Position / Area of Study	Assets and Focuses
Katie Brickwood	SEC Supervisor	Spanish Fluency Prior Experience in Nebaj Group and Time Management Skills
Jacinta Ceto Cobo	Director, <i>La Escuela Especial</i>	Special Education Teaching Community and Organizational Leadership
Leah Dunlevy	SEC Intern / Journalism, International Studies	Spanish Working Proficiency Environmentally Sustainable Development Time and Project Management Skills

¹¹ 3 Guatemalan Quetzales. USD1 is equal to about Q7.77.

Jason Kwon	SEC Intern / Biomedical Engineering	Spanish Working Knowledge Generating Ideas Graphic Design Skills
Amos Pomp	SEC Intern / American Studies, Environmental Policy & Culture	Spanish Proficiency Environmental and Experiential Education Strong Writing Skills, English and Spanish

Challenges and Opportunities

Throughout our time in Nebaj, we met regularly with Jacinta at the school to discuss what had been done already with respect to the *bisutería* and how to improve the program. Past interns had made example bracelets for students to copy based on bracelet patterns they thought would appeal to a foreign market. The idea was to improve the appeal of the bracelets to potential buyers and to set a quality standard for the students' work. Past interns had also brought batches of bracelets to the U.S. to sell at their respective universities. Based on these and other past experiences, we worked with Jacinta to identify challenges facing the *bisutería* and limiting sales as well as opportunities for growth.

Bisutería Challenges and Opportunities

#	Challenge	Opportunity
1.	Q35, the sale price of the bracelets, is too expensive for most Nebaj residents. Tourists/foreigners are the ideal buyers, as the tourism industry in Nebaj is growing and most bracelets are sold abroad.	Expand within the target markets. Alternatively, assess ways to lower the bracelet cost/price to target new markets.
2.	Marketing information about the jewelry and the school at the vendor <i>El Descanso</i> is unclear. Buyers may not know what they are supporting.	Create standardized marketing materials that explain the history and mission of <i>La Escuela Especial</i> and highlight the students.
3.	It is difficult to calculate how much money the <i>bisutería</i> is making for both the school and the students.	Create mechanisms for measuring expenditures, sales and profits.

4.	Having groups sell jewelry in the US is unsustainable because each batch runs out. Also, it is difficult to ship jewelry to the US.	Formalize a bracelet exchange process to use each time a group of SEC interns works in Nebaj (this occurs multiple times a year). Or, send a large bulk order of jewelry to the US and sell a few at a time or online.
5.	Some earring/bracelet designs sell better than others.	Use data from sales or customer surveys to determine which designs are more popular. Create more popular designs. Learn from other artisans regarding how they create and market their products and transfer successful strategies.
6.	It is quite difficult to measure the social impact of the <i>bisutería</i> at reducing stigma.	Survey students (if possible), parents, and teachers at the school to see if and how students and their families benefit from the <i>bisutería</i> . Survey Nebaj residents to see if they are aware of the <i>bisutería</i> and its mission and if their perceptions of disabilities have changed. Holding community events and workshops focused on social integration of people with disabilities to change public opinion.

Project Choices and Implementation

Working on the *bisutería* with *La Escuela Especial* was our team’s secondary project during our time in Nebaj, so we wanted to be realistic with our time when choosing what to do. We decided that opportunities #5 and #6 were beyond our ability to address during the time we had in Nebaj, especially if we wanted to address the other opportunities. We spoke with Jacinta, and she agreed that planning a community event would not be the most productive use of our time because of its low potential to enact lasting change. We did briefly pursue opportunity #5, but we discovered that we lacked the time and resources to develop effective outcomes. However, we were able to achieve outcomes vis-à-vis opportunities #1, #2, #3, and #4.

Opportunity #1: One of Jacinta’s main goals for the *bisutería* was to sell more bracelets, and we wanted to figure out a way to sell more bracelets continuously. We decided to focus on expanding sales locally by finding new vendors, unaffiliated with *La Escuela Especial*, to display and sell the students’ jewelry. We knew that these vendors would need to be businesses visited mostly by wealthier locals, tourists, and/or foreigners because they are able to afford the

jewelry prices. *El Descanso*, the original and only vendor at the time¹², is a hostel lobby and a travel agency in addition to a restaurant, serving travelers and wealthier diners. Looking for similar establishments, we identified hostels/hotels as potential jewelry vendors. We also thought of the city mall, Kumus, where there are some higher-end retail stores, though we did not yet know that Domingo Felix was the mall's owner.

Potential Bisutería Vendors

Business Name	Business Type	Result
Popi's	Hostel and Café	Popi's was the original location for <i>La Escuela Especial</i> . They agreed to display and sell bracelets and marketing materials (see Opportunity #2 below), but they wanted us to provide a glass display case with a lock to prevent theft.
Hotel Santa María	Hotel	They agreed to display and sell bracelets and marketing materials, but they wanted a stand on which to display the jewelry.
Hotel Real La Villa	Hotel	They agreed to display and sell bracelets and marketing materials, but they wanted a stand on which to display the jewelry.
Coqueta Zapatos y Complementos	Shoes & Accessories	This store is in the Kumus mall. One of the owners is the daughter-in-law of Domingo Felix, whom Amos Pomp met when he went to the mall's office to ask about bracelet sales. They agreed to display and sell bracelets and marketing materials, and they asked how they could donate bracelet making materials and make recommendations for new bracelet styles. We put them in touch with Jacinta.
Hotel Turansa	Hotel	Although this hotel serves wealthier Guatemalan tourists, they did not agree to sell jewelry.
Hotel Villa Nebaj	Hotel	We were never able to get in touch with the hotel's owner, who was out of town all summer.
Hotel Dulce Sueño	Hospitality, Barber Shop	This cheap hostel serves Guatemalans looking for a temporary place to stay. The owner said his clients would not be able to afford the jewelry.

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¹² As two longtime partners of SolCom, *La Escuela Especial* and *El Descanso* have an ongoing partnership as well.

Fortunately, Jacinta had enough wooden/metal display stands to supply Hotel Santa María, Hotel Real La Villa, and Coqueta Zapatos y Complementos. We were unable to secure a glass display case for Popi's due to time and financial constraints, but they said they would keep bracelets and find a way to sell them with what they have. By the end of our time in Nebaj, Jacinta supplied us with 20 bracelets for each of the four new vendors, which we delivered on the display cases along with marketing materials and documents to track inventory and sales. We also left Jacinta's contact information with each vendor, and we left all relevant information with Jacinta. The reason we visited and communicated with vendors was simply because we had the time while Jacinta was consistently busy with work at the school. In the future, Jacinta will be able to contact current and potential new vendors on behalf of the school herself.

Opportunity #2: For vendors past, present, and future, Jason and Amos created bilingual (Spanish/English) marketing materials that highlight the mission of the jewelry store and can be used as standard handouts for future school functions. Jason created a poster to hang above jewelry displays, and Amos created a tri-fold brochure for buyers or anyone else to take with them to learn more about *La Escuela Especial*. Images and descriptions of the brochure are included below; the poster displays a simplified version of comparable information. Jacinta and Daria wrote out the school's mission and history for the Spanish sections of the marketing materials, and Jacinta provided a testimonial for the brochure. While we were making the materials, we periodically asked Jacinta for feedback and made changes based on her comments.

When it came time to print the marketing materials, Jacinta said that she had a contact who could cheaply print them for her. But the school still did not have enough funds to print posters and brochures for each vendor and a few extras to have for the future. Katie told us that we could apply to SolCom for the funds, which we did. Our choice was not the best option in terms of empowerment because we paid for a project for the school instead of helping the school be able to pay for the project on their own. Further, it is not sustainable if they need to print more in the future.

La Historia de Nuestra Escuela *History of Our School*

El Centro de Educación Especial se fundó con el apoyo de Elena Ceto, Daria Guzmán, y Jacinta Ceto... denominándose Mayan Hope por Don Langley durante el año 2005, oficializándose como E.O.D.E.E. por el MINEDUC en el año 2011. Hoy en día, la Escuela está ubicada en el Cantón Xolacul, atendiendo a sus estudiantes, funcionando como tal en una casa rentada por el consejo de administración de la Asociación de Mayan Hope donde laboran 5 docentes contratadas por el MINEDUC, un terapeuta contratado por Pap Ku'mu's, y siendo dirigida actualmente por la profesora Jacinta Ceto Cobo.



Mayan Hope was founded in 2005 by Jacinta Ceto Cobo, Daria Margarita Guzman

Cedillo, and Don Langley, who recognized that the special needs children of Nebaj were being overlooked by Guatemala's public school system. Today, the school helps nearly 30 students receive educations they would not otherwise have received, through the school's wonderful teachers (who are now supported by the public school system) and Mayan Hope's Board of Directors.

¡Planifiquemos para el futuro! *Help us plan for the future!*

¡Estamos construyendo un nuevo edificio! Nuestra escuelita está en terreno alquilado. Conseguimos el terreno en la foto abajo, donde esperamos construir aulas nuevas, un taller, una panadería, un huerto escolar, y más. ¡Ahora solo nos falta finalizar la recaudación de los fondos necesarios!

We are building a new school! Our current building is on rented land. We have bought the land in the photo below, where we plan to build new classrooms, a workshop, a bakery, an educational garden, and more. Now we just need the funds!



¡Involúcrate! Visita www.mayanhope.org para aprender más y hacer una donación. O, ¡compra una de las joyas hechas por nuestros estudiantes!

Get involved! Visit www.mayanhope.org to learn more and to make a donation. Or, buy a beautiful bracelet or earrings made by our students!



La Escuela Oficial de Educación Especial

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La Escuela Oficial de Educación Especial *Special Education School* - Nebaj, Guatemala -



La única escuela en la región para estudiantes con necesidades especiales.
The only school in the region for students with special needs.

www.mayanhope.org

The brochure features images of the students, the school, and the *bisutería*. Each section of the brochure appears in Spanish and English, and the history and goals of the school and Mayan Hope are outlined along with a call for donations for the new building.



**Nuestra Misión
Our Mission**

Mayan Hope es una organización sin fines de lucro que apoya directamente a la Escuela Oficial de Educación Especial, donde asisten estudiantes con discapacidades específicas como: cognitivas (intelectual, síndrome Down...), sensoriales (visual, auditiva...), y físicas, con el objetivo de contribuir a darles a estos estudiantes un futuro más brillante.



Mayan Hope is a non-profit organization that seeks to support underprivileged Guatemalans, and to provide them with brighter futures. The special education school provides free education to children and young adults with a variety of special needs ranging from Downs Syndrome and other cognitive delays, to deafness and physical handicaps.



La Bisutería

Dando Valor al Trabajo de los Estudiantes

En nuestra joyería, vendemos pulseras y aretes, ¡hechos a mano por los estudiantes en la escuela! La misión de la bisutería es enseñar a los estudiantes que pueden ganar un pequeño ingreso y que su trabajo tiene valor. También, ventas generan fondos para que la escuela pueda comprar materiales educativos, los cuales no son proporcionados por el gobierno.



¡Compra una pulsera hoy para apoyar a nuestra escuela!



Encuentra nuestras joyas en El Descanso y otras tiendas participantes. Si quieres involucrarte más, por favor preguntar a los atendientes en El Descanso que te pongan en contacto con la escuela.

The Jewelry Store

Valuing Student Work

We sell quality, hand-crafted bracelets and earrings made by our talented students! The mission of the bisutería is to teach our students that they can earn a small income and that their work has real value. Sales also generate funding for the school to purchase educational materials, which the government does not provide.



Buy a bracelet today to support our school!

Look for our jewelry at El Descanso and other participating venues. To get further involved, please talk to an attendant at El Descanso to get in touch with a representative of the school about possible next steps.





"Gracias a cada uno de las personas quienes valoran el trabajo de cada uno de nuestros estudiantes de la Escuelita e insto a cada quien que se tome en cuenta la capacidad que tienen los estudiantes a pesar de sus discapacidades. Démosle el espacio para ellos y la oportunidad que cada estudiante merece." - Jacinta Ceto Cobo, Directora

The inside of the brochure includes a personal testimonial from Jacinta and an in-depth look at the purpose of the *bisutería*.

Opportunity #3: Leah Dunlvey created administrative documents to facilitate data tracking for both Jacinta and vendors. She created spreadsheets for Jacinta to track expenditures and sales to calculate profit as well as to keep track of which vendors had how many of each bracelet type. Leah also made inventory sheets for vendors to track sales and to know how much they owed Jacinta each month. When collecting the revenue each month, Jacinta counts the bracelets the store has and the revenue received to double check that the calculations are correct. Jacinta agreed these materials were important for the bracelet business because they enable her to directly track expenditures and profits. In the future, she could lower or raise the cost of the

bracelets depending on whether they are selling and the school's target profit. Overall, the tracking materials will allow the *bisutería* to expand to additional vendors while maintaining inventory measures and vendor accountability.

Opportunity #4: Another project idea was to create a functioning online sales page for foreigners to purchase jewelry from the *bisutería*. We hoped that this could be done via the school's Facebook page or Mayan Hope's website. However, we had issues accessing the Facebook account because it took too long for us to figure out who had the password. Also, Mayan Hope board members did not want the school to focus on the *bisutería* when the construction for the new school building was a more pressing matter. This was in conflict with what Jacinta and the students wanted, which is why we were still working on the jewelry project, but it made sense not to pursue online sales to avoid organizational complications. Also, we did not have the time or resources to help Jacinta overcome shipping and other logistical barriers.

Opportunity #5: One of our SEC supervisors was invested in the idea of making the bracelets more marketable somehow. He mentioned the idea of linking the bracelets with something distinctly Guatemalan. For example, making bracelets out of volcanic rock would appeal to potential foreign buyers because volcanoes are more recognizably Guatemalan and appealing than the generic beads *La Escuela Especial* uses. To learn more about marketable Guatemalan products and gain ideas, we contacted *Creamos Futuros* (We Create Futures), an organization that has a lot of success selling jewelry in Guatemala City. Katie had visited *Creamos Futuros* on a past visit to the capital and recommended that we reach out to them. *Creamos Futuros'* jewelry is made by local artists out of recycled materials from the infamously large Guatemala City dump. To some, this recycled jewelry may have more appeal because of its material meaning. Our supervisor expanded this line of thought further by suggesting the *bisutería* expand into other, more marketable products, like shampoo. Due to time and logistical constraints, we decided not to pursue opportunity #5; however, we agree that it may be prudent to consider more marketable products that similarly teach students practical skills, earn them some money, and show the community that their works has societal value. Also, *La Escuela Especial* is already thinking along these lines with their new infrastructure and programming in the new school building.

Finally, we originally were not going to bring jewelry back to the U.S. to sell because it is not currently a sustainable venture. However, on our last day in Nebaj, Jacinta asked us if we could sell some bracelets in the States. We agreed, and we brought 25 bracelets and six pairs of earrings. Perhaps in the future, regular transport of jewelry to other countries could make this a more sustainable source of income for the *bisutería*.

Outcomes

In December 2018, Amos Pomp and Leah Dunlevy returned to Nebaj to follow up on a different SEC project. During our short stay, we were able to confirm that Hotel Real La Villa is still displaying the bracelets at their reception desk, though we did not see the marketing materials. Popi's, on the other hand, does not have the bracelets or the marketing materials on display in their main lounge area. Because we were focused on a different project, we unfortunately did not undertake any further follow-up with respect to the *bisutería*. Based on our current communication with Katie and Jacinta, sales do not appear to have gone up after the addition of new vendors to the *bisutería*.

We sold all of the jewelry we brought to the States, except for one bracelet, within two months. The majority of the jewelry sold at the GESI Final Summit, where GESI students and staff who worked in other countries and in the GESI office in Evanston, IL reconvened to reflect on the summer. The bracelets sold for \$5 each, and the earrings varied depending on their price in quetzales. Some people donated money above the price of the jewelry. Amos collected the money (\$173), which he eventually sent to Jacinta via bank transfer.

Image Description: This image features a quote from the SEC 2018 impact report. Seated in the courtyard of *La Escuela Especial* from left to right: Katie, Leah, Amos, Andie Gomez-Patron, Evan Nixon.¹³

Conclusion

Members of Mayan Hope, SEC Supervisors, and our team sometimes questioned whether making and selling jewelry is the best method for the school to achieve its mission. Do they make enough money, for the students or the school, to be worthwhile to make? Do they attract and reach a large enough market to change minds about the societal value of educating students with disabilities? We felt that although bracelets might not be an optimal product to be selling in the Nebaj market, there is enough potential for them to be profitable with an increased market of foreigners. Our team's ultimate motivation to continue with the project, however, was that making the bracelets is something the students really enjoy doing and something Jacinta really wants to pursue on their behalf.



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¹³ Image source: An SEC Facebook post on December 6, 2018. [facebook.com/socialentrepreneurcorps/](https://www.facebook.com/socialentrepreneurcorps/)

Also, the new vendors' willingness to support the cause surprised us. Sometimes development work is more about the social mission than programmatic logistics and outcome.

We also learned that although our project works on a small scale, it was nevertheless valuable to those involved. The expanded *bisutería* may only earn the school a few more quetzales each month, but the increased opportunity for students to make jewelry contributes to the development of invaluable skills, such as craftsmanship and self-confidence. During meetings at *La Escuela Especial*, we were often interrupted by students asking us how old we were or starting games of tag. Other students would sidle up to Jacinta as she spoke of challenges and triumphs from the school's history. From the way they smiled in pictures, it was easy to tell the students have a blast on jewelry-making days and the *bisutería*, an integral part of a loving school community, spreads joy.

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