Oaxaca & Poughkeepsie: Sister Cities United by Road Scholar Participants

BY ELLIE CHARWAT | ROAD SCHOLAR CLASS OF ’02

The cities of Poughkeepsie, N.Y., and Oaxaca, Mexico, share a special bond; one that my husband, Martin, and I — Poughkeepsie, N.Y. residents — understand on a personal level. Of Poughkeepsie’s 30,000 inhabitants, 20 percent are Hispanic, many from Oaxaca and Puebla in Mexico. Every summer, Poughkeepsie celebrates the Oaxacan corn festival, “La Guelaguetza,” with bands and dancers from Oaxaca and the greater New York region. Food trucks sell Oaxacan dishes to the thousands of people in attendance.

Martin and I are both “Book Buddies” in the Poughkeepsie school system, where one-third of the students are Hispanic, many from Oaxaca and Puebla, and I’ve been tutoring a Mexican woman in English for several years. I helped her study for her citizenship exam and have watched her family flourish in our shared city.

So, in 2018, we enrolled in Road Scholar’s “Oaxaca and Puebla: Ancient Civilizations & Modern Cuisine” (Program #21976DGR) to dive even deeper into the roots of a culture we interact with every day at home in New York.

During our program, we were blown away by the Zapotec sites at Monte Alban and Mitla, which showed the sophistication of those cultures in architecture, engineering and astronomy dating from 500 B.C. to A.D. 800. We took part in three cooking classes, where we learned how to use the basic ingredients of corn, tomatoes, peppers, beans and squash in a variety of tasty recipes. As our group of 12 RoadScholars spent our afternoons chopping, grinding and mixing the many ingredients in mole, we gained an appreciation for the amount of work that goes into making mole sauce at the many Oaxacan restaurants in Poughkeepsie.

But we came away with much more than recipes and an understanding of the culture. We felt a deep connection between the cities, and we wanted to make it official.

Before departing on our Oaxaca program, I contacted Poughkeepsie Mayor Robert Rolison to see if he would be interested in establishing a sister-city link between the two cities. To my pleasant surprise, he said yes! So Mayor Rolison gave me a letter to deliver to the Mayor of Oaxaca.

Upon arrival, we got in touch with Nora Ortiz at the Oaxacan mayor’s office. We met with her twice during our Road Scholar program in Mexico, and she has been instrumental in facilitating our ongoing efforts. She and I helped coordinate communication between our respective mayors and have since formed a Poughkeepsie-Oaxaca Friendship Committee to liaise with the Oaxacan sister city organization “Culturamas Hermanas” that Nora now heads.
La Guelaguetza festival in Poughkeepsie (top); Above: The two teachers and a guidance counselor from the Poughkeepsie Middle School (pictured with Poughkeepsie Mayor Robert Rolison in back) just returned from their one-week visit to Oaxaca as part of the Poughkeepsie-Oaxaca Friendship exchange program. They visited historic sites, a village school and met with representatives of the governor’s office.

This summer, donations from the citizens of Poughkeepsie funded a trip for two public school teachers to travel to Oaxaca to learn about the cultural and historical backgrounds of many of their pupils and their families. Upon return, the teachers will share their experiences with their colleagues, students, parents and school officials.

The head of the Dutchess County Arts Council and a member of our Friendship Committee recently made a trip to Oaxaca to contact some of the many artisans who work in weaving, pottery, jewelry making and other crafts to explore the possibilities of an artisan exchange program between our two regions. I had visited many of these artisans on our Road Scholar trip and was impressed with the quality and beauty of their work.

Two rugs, a necklace and other purchases remind me of our visit to Oaxaca and Puebla.

We hope that the cross-cultural experience that was born in our Road Scholar program will continue to grow for the residents of Oaxaca and Poughkeepsie as they learn more about each other through cultural and political exchanges.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Eleanor (Ellie) Charwat** comes from Poughkeepsie New York, where she lives with husband Martin. They love to travel and have been on many Road Scholar trips. Ellie also helped start the Marist College Center for Lifetime Study, an affiliate of the Road Scholar Network, which now has 650 members! Ellie was an administrator at Marist College for 13 years, was elected as a town councilman and a library trustee and is active in many volunteer activities. She and Martin lived in Curitiba, Brazil for four years when he was a U.S. Foreign Service Officer and Ellie taught English. The Charwats have two children and eight grandchildren to whom they are passing on the travel bug.

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