

Letter to the Parents of the Students
in the 2006 Morehouse/Spelman Colleges'
Summer Study Abroad Program in Oaxaca, Mexico
From the Co-Directors: Dr. Lee Gallo and Dr. Pat Pogal

We are so very happy that your child will be with us this summer in our study abroad program in Oaxaca [wa ha' ka], Mexico. As a parent myself, I (Lee Gallo) remember the anxiety I went through when my son studied abroad during his junior year in college. Knowing how a letter like this would have helped me, Dr. Pogal and I have decided to write to you so you can learn more about our program.

Beginning of the Program: When I was in my twenties I spent several summers in Mexico doing anthropological work with musicians there. I was awestruck when I arrived in Oaxaca, and returned as often as I could to this charming colonial capital. I clearly remember feeling that if I ever had a chance to introduce my students to Mexico, this was where I would bring them.

In the mid-eighties—as the program was still getting established—there were some rough summers when, in order to make the program pay for itself, the Spelman women and I had to share rooms. But soon we could count on enthusiastic “returnees” to do our marketing on campus and our group size began to average between eight to twelve Morehouse and Spelman students. For nearly a decade after we first started making these trips, there was only one other UNCF college, Lincoln, with any overseas program of its own. The programs at predominantly White campuses did not appeal to many of our students, who were either put off by their prohibitive costs, or felt anxious about being the only African-American in a study-abroad group.

In the past twenty years the program has met with phenomenal success, often being the first step—the “soft landing”—for students who afterwards go on to spend their junior year abroad. This summer we have 18 students in the program. In addition, next winter a faculty group from Morehouse will go to Oaxaca to design components for future programs in which students will earn credit, for the first time ever, in a variety of new disciplines besides Spanish language.

It might interest you to know that one of our early participants, Ms. Ramona Houston, who was then a student at Clark University, decided to continue pursuing her interest in this region after her summer in Oaxaca with us. She recently finished her Ph.D. in history, specializing in African-American / Mexican relations and has just returned to Morehouse to teach in the History Department.

Oaxaca City, founded 1529: As early as 500 BC—when Rome first started coining currency—construction began on the pyramids of Monte Albán, on the outskirts of Oaxaca (“Oaxaca City”), the capital of the state of Oaxaca. These are the ruins of the ancient **Zapotec Indian civilization** that peaked from 250-750 AD, many centuries before Europe entered the Middle Ages. Even today, nearly half of Oaxaca City’s 3.2 million population continues to be Indian. With little industry, the state of Oaxaca has remained one of Mexico’s poorest. “In 129 of the state’s 570 municipalities, more than 60% of the people are without toilets or drainage, in 93 municipalities, more than half have no electricity (while) tourism is booming in Oaxaca City and nearby villages” (Mexico, The Lonely Planet, 1998, page 713).

The Program in Oaxaca City: The students are in classes 9-1 p.m. daily at the small **Centro de Idiomas**, which is a part of the major state university, Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez. Although there are Mexican students there also, studying English, our students are placed in classes created exclusively for them. Courses available to them include Spanish conversation, different levels of grammar, and Mexican literature, history, and economics—some students have even taken non-credit instruction in dancing and cooking. One afternoon a week, there is a lecture by a local professional—for example, an art museum curator, anthropologist, journalist, or a resident African-American poet. Students return to their “homes” after classes for the main meal of the day, usually at 2 p.m. Afterwards, around 4 p.m., they are free for the remainder of the day. In the evenings students often meet with new Mexican friends from the Centro.

The homestays are really the heart of our program. The placements are all done through our on-site director, Mrs. Isabel Castro, who lives in Oaxaca and has been with our program since its inception. Students state preferences regarding pets, foods, the presence of other youth their age, etc., and Mrs. Castro uses this information to make placements among families who may also have served our program for years. There is only one student per family—all this is part of our effort to make sure they have as much practice in Spanish as possible. Usually the families are middle-class, which in Mexico often means homes with domestic help. Mexican families are very traditional, close-knit and often protective, and our students frequently form close attachments, truly becoming one of the family. (In fact, a student who studied in the program last year, returned to visit last Christmas. He is now returning this summer and wants to live with the same family. It is not uncommon for participants to stay in touch with, or even revisit, their Oaxacan “families.”)

On **the weekends in the city**, we take field trips to nearby villages to participate in a typical “market day,” or visit craftsmen or businesses to see how local villagers earn their living. Since the Oaxaca region is one of Mexico’s major craft centers, even those who are not enthusiastic shoppers succumb to the temptation—buying hand-woven rugs, hand-carved wooden animal figures or toys, the regional black pottery, and charming hand-painted ceramic figures.

After two weeks of classes, our group is joined by a second Morehouse or Spelman professor serving as another co-director. The co-directors accompany the student group for a **week-long tour of the Pacific coast**. Our first destination is a group of impoverished villages of Afro-Mexicans on the Western coast, the *Pueblos Negros* (“black villages”). These are some forty remote villages whose inhabitants are descendants of slaves who were shipwrecked along this coast, or who worked on the tobacco plantations in the northern Oaxacan valley. Father Glyn Jemmott, who has served the religious needs of these villagers for about ten years, is also their unofficial spokesperson, a sort of liaison with the outside world. He accompanies our student group for a three-day tour of the area, visiting the small museum of African heritage he was so instrumental in establishing, and guiding our work in the villages on some brief service project. (This is the component of the program we plan to expand once Morehouse faculty have worked on-site there, designing service projects for one hour of academic credit in their discipline.)

After the villages we then spend two nights at the beautiful **beach town of Puerto Escondido** (“hidden port”). With the creation of a Club Med in the nearby town of Huatulco [wah-tool’-

koh], this area of the state began booming immediately after we first started visiting in the mid-1980s. Luckily the owner of perhaps the nicest hotel in Puerto Escondido, the Santa Fe (<http://www.mexonline.com/hotelsantafe.htm>), was a retired U.S. teacher who has given us excellent prices for accommodations. You can access the on-line pictures and appreciate our delight in dining in the open air while overlooking the ocean. Finally, we return to Oaxaca City overnight—a seven-hour trip!—on a very nice first-class bus. At this point, three weeks into the program, the first of the co-directors returns to Atlanta, and the second takes over for the final two weeks. You should know that the second co-director this year, Dr. Patricia Pogal, lived with a Oaxacan family herself for the summer while in a high-school summer exchange program, and now has about twelve years of experience with our program.

The most popular past-time in Oaxaca is “hanging out” in the one-square-block park or plaza, the *Zócalo*, in the very center of town. In the middle of the park is a beautiful bandstand, just big enough to hold the 30 or so musicians of the state band which gives free concerts there twice a week. All around the park are cafés, restaurants and the major public offices for the state. Absolutely everyone congregates in the *zócalo*. Here you see vendors of all sorts—hawking toys, flowers, jewelry, balloons, kitchen utensils, etc. Several groups of performing musicians rotate among the major cafés. One has the distinct feeling that a visit here is the best tonic for melting away all anxiety. I have my own special café where students know they can join me in the evenings—either to chat about some program issue or just to relax together.

Lastly, your child may have told you that we have a series of pre-departure meetings where they can talk to past student participants and also receive vital information on health issues, packing, passports, the Visa credit card, Mexicans manners and customs, etc. You will be relieved to know that **doctors** are much more accessible and numerous than in the U.S. There is a twenty-four-hour medical clinic and some of our Mexican “parents” are also physicians. Finally, we like to let parents know that it is easier for you to phone your child than vice versa—the Mexicans have a complicated billing system; **international calls** from residences can be prohibitive in cost; and the “family” usually does not get their bill until our student has left Oaxaca.

We know you will be pleased with your child’s experience and performance in Oaxaca. It has always been especially rewarding for us, the Spanish professors of these students, to see them thrive in the setting of Oaxaca and grow to appreciate it as much as we.