

Napier Initiative is a Gift

In a keynote address to the Napier Celebration several years ago, David Menefee-Libey emphasized the value to elders of working with young, enthusiastic and bright students. Elders often see their dreams for a better world bursting forth. Fellows may not realize how important to Napier elders are the few months, piled on top of many other activities, that are spent together evoking a future promise. This note by a recent Mentor helps to make the case.

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By Dave Bunje

It has been a unique blessing to be a Napier Mentor this past school year. For one, I had the good fortune to be paired with Maria Juanita Duran Gonzales, an intelligent, resourceful, other-centered, purposeful student at Pomona College. Maria was born in Colombia, went to high school in Florida, college in Pomona, study abroad in Ecuador, and now graduate studies at Cambridge University in the UK, so right off the bat we enjoyed fascinating inter-cultural exposure!

A second blessing was the project that Maria proposed for a Napier Grant. Having witnessed the social-psychological impact of the economic/colonial drive to extract rare trees and birds out of coastal Ecuador, her proposal was to engage youth in learning and appreciating the precious ecology of their living land. They would hear from and record elders describing the richness of their native culture. They would then set up processes for passing on the knowledge and ecological practices needed to resist/counteract the greedy extraction-oriented mindset that is slowly creeping in.

A third blessing of the Napier mentoring program was the delightful inter-generational friendship we experienced. In addition to being quite smart, Maria is very warm and congenial. She included my wife, Janet, in each of our consultations and socials, introduced us to her friends, and we had a wonderful time meeting her family, who had traveled from Colombia, Florida, and Washington DC, at graduation. Mentoring was a warm-hearted experience.

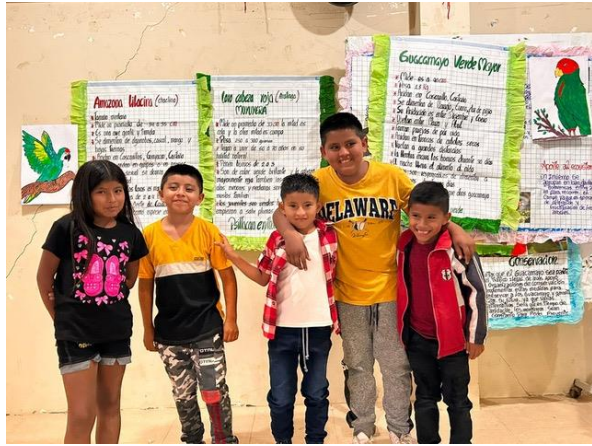
A fourth blessing was witnessing the flexibility, adaptation and consequent sagacity that the Napier program fosters. In January there was a military crackdown in Ecuador making Maria's in-person leadership unsafe. So she re-shaped her proposal to be able to lead it remotely. Maria did not win the \$20,000 Napier Award. So she promptly assembled the consolation prize and additional resources, coordinated with the partner organizations, and remotely guided a reformatted "Las Balsas Youth Ecological Project" this summer. The result: 90 youth ages 8-12, two hands-on recycling workshops, two birding field trips (with supplied binoculars), and a concluding Bird Trafficking Youth Campaign competition between five groups to illustrate and promote a care-of-the earth mindset, campaigning against wildlife trafficking.

Oh my! So much accomplished with limited resources! And the mission continues. Maria writes, "With many families relying on hunting wildlife for food, children must discuss the lessons of the initiatives at home..... The next chapter will be partnering organizations making recycling workshops, Birders Jr., and environmental campaigns permanent endeavors."

Thank you, Napier Initiative. I never would have gained such a special friendship, I never would have learned so much about Colombia, Ecuador, Pomona College, and the debilitating extractivist economic practices still going on, without this program. And the Las Balsas community in Ecuador is more grounded in their identity and more engaged with their youth and protecting their environment all because of this little great idea at Pilgrim Place. Well done!



Identifying the wild birds of coastal Ecuador. Youth teaching other youth the importance of wildlife protection



Youth made posters and drawings about each of the endangered birds in their community to promote protection



Maria's mother, father, brother, and grandmother came over for a visit the day after graduation.