

Boise native sowing 'new seeds' for Guatemalan farmers

By Michael Brown
Editor

BOISE—It's pretty common for young people to think they can change the world. Curt Bowen, 23, set his sights a little lower. He's talking Guatemala.

Bowen, former student at Sacred Heart Catholic School and grandson of Deacon James E. Bowen of St. Mark's, is executive director of Semilla Nueva (New Seed), a non-profit dedicated to helping "communities gain economic independence and rejuvenate their land through hands-on education and collaborative sustainable agriculture projects," according to the group's Web site, www.semillanueva.org.

Bowen, a 2008 graduate of Whitman College in Walla Walla, Wash., began by leveraging a high school Advanced Placement chemistry class through his passion for the poor into expanding biofuel technology centers in Central America. Now, with Semilla Nueva, he's trying to help a small farming community in Guatemala adapt its farming methods to ensure that, despite soil depletion and economic insolvency, family



NEW SEED PROVIDES NEW HOPE — Nueva with its president Boise native Curt Bowen, right. (ICR photo courtesy of Curt Bowen)

non-profits and community organizations to teach their biodiesel process and built test processors with several groups. They also held three international conferences to share the technology, which subsequently has been the basis of several large projects in Central America.

After graduating, the group switched from biodiesel to agriculture, and they currently work on three main technologies, no-till, green manures and agroforestry. No-till means minimizing disturbance of the soil, and leaving a layer of mulch which protects the soil's humidity. Green manures are high nitrogen plants which can be planted in the off season and used as a natural fertilizer. Agroforestry involves planting high nitrogen, indigenous trees in their fields to provide an additional source of organic fertilizer and create natural wind barriers. By adding trees to agricultural areas, the hope is that it also will begin to offset

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farms can be sustained there for years to come.

He's not doing it alone, however. College friends Joseph Bornstein, Brook Golling and Darren Yondorf are sharing the risk, the word and, they all hope, the satisfaction of helping to preserve a way of life for Guatemalan farmers by implementing small changes in how they farm through local community leaders.

In the tiny village of La Maquina in southwest Guatemala, there are hundreds of families for whom farming is part of a culture, although some work second jobs because the corn they grow actually loses money for them. Still, they grow it, Bowen said, because that's what they've always grown and because it is a major source of calories in their diet. "They are actually paying to grow it," Bowen said. "Culturally, that's not going to change."

What Semilla Nueva is trying to do is introduce new techniques with the help of local farming leaders. Bowen and his friends want to show the leaders that these techniques will save them money by introducing free, natural fertilizers, instead of purchasing and treating the ground with chemicals. The techniques will also rejuvenate the soil through added organic material, reduce erosion and ensure that they can continue to farm

the land they have for years to come.

"We hope that after a year or two, they've had a chance to see how it works on their land" and will encourage the other farmers in the community to use the techniques themselves, said Bowen, who visited family in Boise during the holidays.

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The journey began six years ago when he joined a group from Whitman traveling to Nicaragua called the Build-a-House project. The group collected money to build a house for a widowed wife and young

mother and believed that they had more than enough. However, upon reaching Guatemala, they discovered that the costs of building materials had skyrocketed because of rises in fuel prices. By doing the labor themselves, they were able to get the house built, but Bowen and his group returned to the U.S. resolved to find a way to relieve the poor from the burden of "petroleum costs."

They worked together and adapted University of Idaho biodiesel technology to a small scale, making it possible for the group to produce their own fuel out of a garage. However, the real goal was to bring this technology to Central America, so they converted and drove a biodiesel bus from Walla Walla through Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. They worked with local



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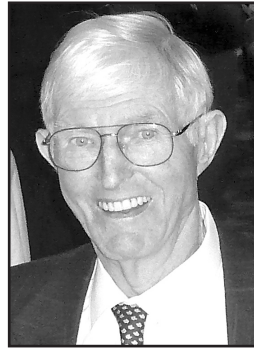
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