



## Limitless Horizons Ixil / Horizontes Sin Límites Ixil

1001 Smith Grade  
Santa Cruz, California 95060  
United States

Frente al salón municipal  
Cantón Ilom, Chajul, Quiché 14005  
Guatemala

[www.limitlesshorizonsixil.org](http://www.limitlesshorizonsixil.org)  
[info@limitlesshorizonsixil.org](mailto:info@limitlesshorizonsixil.org)

### Brief Background and History

Limitless Horizons Ixil (LHI) is a non-religious, non-partisan Guatemala-based organization that combines local and international resources and expertise to realize its goals. *LHI's mission is to work in partnership with the indigenous Maya Ixil community of Guatemala to create opportunities for empowerment and to advance sustainable community development in Chajul.*

LHI serves the community of Chajul. With a population of around 50,000, Chajul is one of three counties belonging to the secluded Ixil region in the Department of Quiché in the western highlands of Guatemala. The entire region is tucked amongst beautiful mountains and has maintained its rich Mayan Ixil traditions and languages; Chajul's residents speak their own distinctive dialect of the Ixil language. Chajul was particularly hard hit by the 36-year long Guatemalan civil war, during which over 200,000 indigenous people were killed. The population continues to suffer from complex post-war effects such as land displacement, emotional trauma, and divided families. In Chajul, entire families live in one-room adobe houses with dirt floors, very little light, and poor ventilation. Smoke from open cooking fires blackens the walls of the homes and presents severe health risks to families. As indicated in a study commissioned by the European Union in 2002,<sup>1</sup> Chajul's economy is rooted in corn-based agriculture. Ninety percent of the community's crop production is corn, 95% of which is used for family self-consumption. Due to unsanitary living conditions, intense smoke inhalation from open fires, and diets that consist predominantly of corn, the three leading causes of death are respiratory problems such as pneumonia, bronchitis, and tuberculosis (34%), intestinal infections and illnesses (17%), and malnutrition (13.7%).

Women and children are at a particular disadvantage in Chajul. Only five percent of children graduate from middle school and less than one percent graduate from high school. This is due to both financial limitations and the expectation that children should leave school at an early age to contribute to the family income with jobs such as working in the fields, hand-washing clothes, producing artisan products, carrying wood, or shining shoes. Consequently, 75% of the adult population in Chajul is illiterate and monolingual Ixil. Of this group, girls are at an even greater disadvantage and are consistently given fewer opportunities than boys, as their education is seen as less important. Guatemala has an alarming 35-45% unemployment rate, and Chajul in particular has very few options for people who seek an honest way to make a sufficient living. Seventy-one percent of the population (94% of women and 47% of men) only can find temporary work for short periods at a time. Eighty percent of Chajul's population lives in general poverty, and of that, 25% live in extreme poverty. Of this 25%, a large portion are single women with families. Men earn an average of 4,235 Quetzales (approximately \$513) per year, while

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<sup>1</sup> See Proyecto Ixil's *Proyecto a favor de la rehabilitación y el autosostenimiento del area Ixil*, a consultatory study by Thomas Pijnenburg Ph.D., commissioned by the European Union, October 2002.

women only earn an average of 412 Quetzales (approximately \$50). In addition, many women and children in Chajul suffer from domestic violence.

LHI envisions a Chajul that is becoming a productive, self-sustaining community with equal gender opportunities for adequate employment and literacy, access to high-quality health care and schools, solid infrastructure, and affordable living costs, which embraces and stays true to its Maya Ixil traditions, heritage, and language.

LHI was founded in 2004 by Chajul native Pedro Caba and American social worker Katie Morrow. Pedro grew up in Chajul and is the first person from the community to graduate from university; he holds a degree in Civil Engineering and is a certified Mayan culture guide. Katie, who holds a Master's degree in Social Work, was inspired by the people of Chajul, as well as shocked by the extreme poverty and lack of opportunities. By uniting their insights and experiences, together Pedro and Katie have created an organization that combines local and international resources and expertise and remains committed to both its local and international roots.

The direction of LHI's programs is determined according to feedback from the community about their needs and LHI's capacity to meet them. The staff in Chajul continues to monitor these needs throughout the year.

Based on LHI's research, it is LHI's vision to serve the community's needs by:

- expanding opportunities for education and literacy;
- investing in employment and workforce development;
- empowering women and promoting gender equity;
- empowering, educating and supporting youth;
- protecting and sustaining the natural environment;
- improving the quality of health and well-being;
- facilitating the development of livable housing and sanitary living conditions;
- fostering socially responsible opportunities for economic growth;
- promoting the community through educational tourism;
- building a collaborative and cooperative community; and
- preserving and promoting the Ixil culture.

Guided by this vision, LHI began a scholarship and youth development program in 2005, supporting 10 students and their families with a scholarship covering tuition and school supplies. The following year, LHI expanded to include 28 students, whose academic careers were further supported by a small LHI library and a professional tutor and computer teacher, who taught classes and mentored the students. In 2007, LHI granted scholarships to 38 students and increased the inventory of its library by over 50%. In 2009, LHI had its first high school class, and by 2010 the program has grown to over 70 students.

In 2008 and 2009, LHI experienced substantial organizational growth, with the support of partner-organization Philanthropiece. Having had a strong foundation in the community from the start, LHI increased its presence by moving its office in order to open the LHI Community Center in the very heart of Chajul. This new space made it possible for LHI to expand its computer lab and programming, hold workshops and trainings, and start several new initiatives related to workforce and economic development, women's empowerment, leadership, health, and education. These additional programs have complemented the scholarship program by providing LHI students, families, and the community as a whole with the supports they need to succeed in their studies and increase employment opportunities. The expansion of LHI's work includes hosting university service-learning groups, initiating workforce development programs, and the opening of Chajul's first public library. Having already finalized non-governmental organization legal status in Guatemala in 2006, LHI was granted 501(c)3 status in the US in 2009. In 2010, LHI is deepening its impact in Chajul by further developing existing programs and exploring new partnerships.

Founded in order to meet the extreme need for community development, gender equality, education, and workforce development in the Chajul area, LHI remains one of a few NGO organizations equipped with appropriate language and cultural skills to serve the isolated Chajul country. Thanks to co-founder Pedro Caba and a team of highly qualified local and international professionals, LHI enjoys a direct link to and unprecedented trust among Chajul's residents. LHI is proud of its innovative approach of encouraging sustainable development through community empowerment and buy-in; LHI is the first organization to do this in Chajul. LHI's style allows members of the community to feel the pride gained through work and to recognize the services they receive as earned and well deserved, rather than as a free handout.

LHI considers itself a part of the community of Chajul and strives to listen carefully, promote local leadership, and continue to be a responsive and responsible partner for the development of new and sustainable initiatives that will improve well-being in Chajul – educationally, economically, and environmentally.



## **LHI's Programs**

LHI manages 10 community programs, which serve a wide range of Chajul's most urgent needs. The programs are in varying degrees of development – some have been established for years, continuing to grow and progress, and while others were started during the past year.

### ***Scholarships***

The LHI scholarship program begins with students entering in 7<sup>th</sup> grade (the first year of middle school), and students are eligible to continue with an LHI scholarship throughout middle and high school. The scholarship opportunity is advertised through presentations in all of Chajul's 6<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms, on the radio, with flyers, and through word of mouth. LHI selects scholarship recipients through an essay evaluation and 1-3 hour interviews with the student and family in their home, which are used to determine financial need and motivation – the two key factors for scholarship selection. The great majority of LHI scholarship students would not be able to continue their education without their scholarship. Girls face greater barriers to education, as seen by the gender gap in educational achievement in Chajul; LHI thus ensures that two-thirds of its scholarship recipients are girls. LHI scholarships cover the costs of tuition and other school expenses, supplies, tutoring, computer classes. Students also have access to the LHI student study center with its library and computer lab, an annual field trip, social events, graduation celebration, as well as opportunities through all of LHI's other community programs. In return for their scholarship, students are expected to write letters to their sponsors, complete a community service requirement by taking care of their student library according to a rotation schedule, and attend LHI meetings. Due to Chajul's extremely high illiteracy rate, most parents cannot help their children with their schoolwork. LHI provides scholarship students with weekly tutoring sessions with a local teacher, giving them the opportunity to get professional help with their assignments as well as time to work together with their peers. Tutoring is offered to all interested students, and is required for those with low grades. The teacher helps students with their homework and reinforces good study and critical thinking skills, which Chajul's students often do not develop through their formal education. LHI strives to present its scholarship students with the comprehensive range of services to provide them with the support necessary for academic and personal success.

### ***Scholarship Student Study Center with Computer Lab***

All LHI scholarship students have access to a study center, including a small library, work space, and six computers to support their academic needs, as well as consistent attention from LHI staff. Students are very eager to use LHI's resources to complete their homework assignments. They are often given work that requires research and/or very specific materials, which are very difficult to find in Chajul. However, using the resources in the library or a computer, students can successfully complete their assignments. The student library has books covering the range of topics that students study in school, which students can borrow or work with in the study center. In addition, computers provide a wealth of valuable information for students through programs like Encarta. The computer lab is also a useful option for typing required assignments, as the alternative is going to an expensive internet cafe. Students are given the opportunity to attend computer classes with an experienced teacher on Saturday mornings, which are particularly useful because middle schools require students to learn to use a computer. The opportunity to take advantage of the study center and computer lab is one of the reasons students are most excited to be in the LHI scholarship program. As most students live in overcrowded, dark, and smoky one-room houses with dirt floors, the study center provides them with a useful well-equipped space for doing their schoolwork.

### ***Saber Sin Límites – Public Library***

LHI established Chajul's first public library, Saber Sin Límites (Limitless Knowledge), which opened to the public in February 2010. Education professionals in Chajul expressed the desperate need for a library, as students have no access to resources for research, completing homework assignments, or reading; schools do not even have books to offer their students. Because homes are typically smoky, crowded, and poorly lit, the library will provide a valuable quiet space for students, teachers, and the rest of the community to read, study, and

research. In Chajul, there is no culture of reading and students spend very little time on their studies outside of school; the library provides a space that supports the practice of reading and studying. LHI's librarian will also hold story hours for young children and conduct workshops with local youth. In addition, some of LHI's older students work in the library, providing these students with a productive work opportunity and reinforcing their own appreciation for reading and library skills. They assist with book organization, teach the community to use the library, help students with their homework, and spread the library's mission by encouraging children to discover the pleasures of reading. The library hosts other community events and LHI programs such as teacher trainings, meetings, and the Community Kiosk.

### ***Intensive Spanish***

In an effort to support the educational development of Chajul's students and prepare them for future workforce and education requirements, LHI offers an annual Intensive Spanish course during students' vacation from school. Chajul's population is primarily monolingual Ixil, a language that is only spoken within a half hour radius of the town. Because of this, strong Spanish language abilities are a necessary skill for school (all subjects are taught in Spanish), for success in finding work, utilizing available resources, and knowing and defending one's rights. LHI brings professional Spanish language instructors to Chajul to teach this month-long, 70-hour course which is open to the community's middle and high school students. Through extensive practice with grammar and vocabulary, the course improves students' communication and comprehension abilities, thus also building self-confidence and the willingness to pursue educational or work opportunities outside of Chajul.

### ***Careers***

This program prepares Chajul's students for future careers and educates them about their higher education and career options. LHI offers guidance counseling, preparation for entrance exams with math and language reinforcement classes, opportunities for job shadowing and vocational training, panel presentations by local school alumni who work as professionals, information about scholarship opportunities in Chajul and around the country, and field trips to these educational institutions. LHI supports students and their families with exploring and choosing among various high school options, the application processes, exam preparation, school visits, and transportation. This program provides Chajul's students with access to valuable information; a crucial support for indigenous children with illiterate parents who often do not prioritize education and are rarely encouraged to pursue academic ambitions. In 2009, LHI piloted the program by conducting a careers presentation for all 9<sup>th</sup> graders in Chajul and opening the opportunity for high school guidance counseling to all these students. In addition, LHI promoted the Fundación Ixil's scholarship opportunity for an elite combined high school/university program in the city of Sololá. LHI successfully assisted 13 students earn these scholarships by providing intensive reinforcement courses in math and Spanish language and accompanying the students to Sololá for one of their entrance exams. LHI will continue to provide students graduating from middle school with comprehensive information detailing high schools and scholarship options around the country.

### ***Work to (L)earn***

This program is a work-study opportunity for LHI scholarship students and their families, and is an important connector among many of LHI's other programs. Work to (L)earn gives students in their third year of middle school and above the opportunity to earn an additional quantity of money each month to supplement their modest scholarships. By giving Chajul's students the opportunity to work for their community's development with LHI, they can deepen their relationship with their community and gain valuable professional skills that will serve them in their careers. Through Work to (L)earn, students and families are given opportunities to earn a fare wage including working in LHI's public library, building safe stoves, selling community health products through Community Kiosk campaigns, acting as guides and cultural mediators for visitors to Chajul, working in LHI's organic vegetable garden, creating artisan products through LHI's artisan program, hosting tourists in their home for a weaving or tortilla-making activity, and cooking snacks for groups of visitors. Work to (L)earn encourages students and families to earn additional money for their education, providing them with a 'hand-up' rather than a 'hand-out,' and allowing them to feel ownership and pride in their achievements. The work is

empowering and increases participants' self-worth by allowing them to earn money towards their own, or their child's, education.

### ***Safe Stoves***

Almost every family in Chajul cooks over an open fire inside the home with little to no ventilation, producing a smoke-filled living environment. The dependence on open fires compromises health in a number of ways. Only one pot of food can be cooked at a time and these fires require continuous attention. Therefore, families are constantly inhaling smoke that causes severe lung and eye problems, and there are frequent burn accidents; these risks are greater for women and children who spend more time near the fire than men. Respiratory-related illnesses are the leading cause of death in Chajul. In addition, both girls and boys as young as four years old are often expected to carry heavy loads of firewood from distances up to a two hours' walk away, precariously strapped to their head with a rope. Open fires negatively impact the environment as their excessive firewood consumption has resulted in extensive deforestation in the Ixil area; smoke from the fires also results in poor overall air quality. LHI works with Community Enterprise Solutions, an Ixil-region based international NGO, to sell safe stoves to Chajul's families at a fair and sustainable price. These stoves, constructed with a chimney to channel smoke out of the house, provide a smoke-free home environment and use only half of the firewood required for an open fire. Safe stoves also make for a safer and cleaner home environment, give women more time to earn an income, and allow children more time to play or concentrate on their studies, as they do not have to collect nearly as much firewood. A safe stove contributes to a family's health by decreasing rates of accidents and eye- and lung-related health conditions.

### ***Community Kiosk***

In partnership with Community Enterprise Solutions, LHI has brought a community health-promoting kiosk to Chajul. This kiosk provides the community with access to useful products that are unable to be found elsewhere. Purifying water filters, solar-powered lamps, reading glasses, energy efficient light bulbs, and vegetable seeds are all available through the kiosk at fair market prices. A group of LHI's female students and mothers are trained to be kiosk sales representatives, learning about the science behind the water purifiers, how to give basic eye exams, etc. This increases their self-confidence and leadership skills, preparing them for employment opportunities. These girls regularly publicize and conduct kiosk campaigns in Chajul in order raise awareness and sell the products, and kiosk products are always available for sale in LHI's community space.

### ***Artisan***

The artisan program is based on preserving and sharing the traditional Mayan arts of weaving using a backstrap loom and hand embroidery. Chajul's women are incredibly skilled at creating beautiful, colorful textiles, in a style that is distinctive to the region. Female LHI students and mothers create artisan products such as woven scarves and bookmarks, and embroidered shirts. The work helps women and students develop business and design skills, thereby developing skills so they can become more self-sufficient. LHI pays a fair wage for the work and provides the women with consistent employment opportunities and income, as well as further training. LHI buys the artisan products at a fair price, and then sells them internationally to raise funds to support its programs in Chajul, thus both directly and indirectly returning the proceeds to the community.

### ***Sustainable Tourism***

LHI's brings visitors to Chajul in two ways, by hosting both international groups and local tourists. For international groups, LHI hosts a group of students or other visitors who participate in cultural activities and/or complete a service project during their visit. Local tourism with LHI targets visitors who are traveling independently and wish to visit Chajul. Sustainable Tourism promotes Chajul's rich culture while stimulating the local economy through employment of LHI families and other Chajul residents, who host activities in their homes, act as guides, cook meals and snacks, host hotel stays, and have an opportunity to sell their artisan products. LHI's tourism program empowers the women and children of Chajul as they lead activities such as tortilla making, weaving, and demonstrating the cooking of their traditional foods. This provides significant

opportunities to share their culture with foreigners and for well-paying work. LHI students also act as guides for tourists, taking them on hikes to traditional Mayan ritual sites and tours around town, which develops their self-confidence and social skills, both important for future jobs. Alternative break trips give international college students the opportunity to volunteer in Chajul with LHI, learn about the local history and culture, and gain awareness of indigenous culture, gender inequality, and poverty conditions in rural Guatemala. Visiting groups have built a sport court for a middle school, poured concrete floors for 3 elementary school classrooms, planted organic family vegetable gardens, held a women's empowerment workshop, refurbished and built a model safe stove in the LHI Community Center, and prepared LHI's public library for opening. Sustainable Tourism provides LHI with international volunteers, budgets for community projects, and income that is reinvested in the community. In January of 2009 and 2010, LHI hosted groups from Brown University during their winter break. LHI has also received visits from the NGOs Philanthropiece, Mothers Acting Up, and Colorado Youth for a Change (CYC) as well as individual tourists from a variety of countries.

