

Around the World

Ak Lu'um International School: A Developing Waldorf School in Quintana Roo, Mexico

— Louise deForest

Tucked quietly away on a hectare of land in the jungle of Playa del Carmen, on the Yucatan Peninsula, is a six-year-old not-for-profit Waldorf Initiative called Ak Lu'um (with the double meaning of *Turtle Sanctuary* or *Our Home*, in Nahuatl, a Maya language). Founded in 2006 by Siobhan Bowers and Gabriela Nunez, and in its present location since 2008, Ak Lu'um strives to bring a bi-lingual Waldorf education to the children living in this tropical vacation destination of Mexico.

It is remarkable to me to see what can happen in a mere six years with focused intention and lots of hard work. The school now spans the early childhood years to sixth grade, with a combined second/third grade and fifth/sixth grade. They have raised-bed gardens, a clay baking oven, a kitchen which serves meals to all the children and faculty, chickens (and a lone turkey who seems perfectly happy), and paths through the jungle where the children can explore and play, as well as separate playgrounds for the early childhood and grades children. It also has an office with a resource library, an open-air rotunda for larger gatherings, a separate first grade classroom and a school store. Solar panels on the roof of the grade school provide the electricity for the school and water is gathered in holding tanks on the roof. They have adapted many traditional Mayan construction methods and the thick walls and roofs of each building provide insulation from the very hot and humid weather and fans in each room give a much-needed breeze. The goal of this school is to become a self-sustaining school and to develop ecological strategies for the future in the fragile ecosystem of the jungle. Several years ago, in recognition of their steps towards this goal, the state of Quintana Roo awarded them the status of being a Green school, the only one on the Mayan Riviera.

This past January, I spent two weeks in this lovely school, working with the faculty, observing the children, mentoring the teachers, and meeting daily with the parents. On my first day there I was free to wander the school, stopping in here and there to observe what was happening and getting a feel for this unique

school. Sitting on the playground taking it all in, I was deeply moved by the activity and the joy that permeates this school: in the garden, the fourth graders were practicing their recorders; from the fifth/sixth grade classroom came the sound of recitations; and in the second/third grade rhythmical games were being played in preparation for Main Lesson. The early childhood students were singing in their circle time and Cita, the mascot dog of Ak Lu'um, was making her rounds, poking her nose in the open doors to make sure all was well. Maurice, the German volunteer, himself a Waldorf graduate, was laying down sod in hopes of growing a lawn, and Jacinto, the man who can do anything that needs doing around the school (and whom the children often feel is the “head” of the school) was busy putting the finishing touches on the newly-built clay oven. The hum I often experience in an active and thriving classroom was here school-wide!

There are two early childhood classrooms with a total of anywhere from twenty-one to twenty-four children. The children are between the ages of one year and six-and-a-half, and come from very diverse backgrounds. Some are from Mexican families that have lived in the Yucatan for generations, others are from the United States, and still others are from any number of European countries. Some are children of the faculty members, and some have transferred from other Waldorf Schools. The classrooms are mixed-age groups with one group having co-teachers and the other being led by Gabriela, the director of the early childhood program, who has an assistant teacher and a volunteer. Great emphasis has been placed on teacher training and almost all the teachers in the school are trained Waldorf teachers or in the process of training, which the school has supported completely. That is quite an accomplishment for a young school!

Each morning, before the children arrive, the faculty and staff gather to greet one another and begin their day together. The weekly verse from the *Calendar of the Soul* is read (in German, Spanish and English) and

then everyone sings together under the palm-thatched roof of the rotunda. And every week begins with the raising of the Mexican flag—required by the Board of Education—with all the elementary school children participating. Then all grade school children gather in the rotunda for greetings, songs, verses and games before everyone separates to their own classrooms. It felt just like a family.

As with many schools around the world financial difficulties exist, in spite of the fact that many of the teachers invested their personal funds directly into the school. Enrollment is low in all the grade classes, and the budget does not allow for specialty teachers, though many teachers teach many extra classes to fill out the curriculum for the children. While these are very real problems, the school was permeated with a sense of joy. The faculty is young and strongly bound together and, among them, there are several natural-born teachers; indeed, so powerfully were they able to bring the content of the curriculum and so skillfully did they work with the rhythm of Main Lesson that I wished new class teachers could come observe and get a taste for what is possible. In part, the joy comes from having the privilege of doing what you do best: they *believe* in what they are doing! And, of course, the children bring joy to the school every day.

From its very beginnings, Ak Lu'um has been committed to having a special-needs inclusion program

and there are several children currently enrolled in the school who benefit from this program. All these children are in the regular classroom and are engaged in every aspect of the day. They, too, are given assignments to do in the classroom, perhaps slightly simpler than those of their classmates but still challenging enough for them to have to work hard. The teachers have greatly appreciated this aspect of their classes, feeling that the other children grow in tolerance and flexibility and that the artistic activities help the children with learning challenges to blossom. Indeed, I watched many of these children arrive at school every morning with shining eyes, happily greeting their classmates (and receiving greetings in return) and showing profound love towards all the teachers at school. Throughout my time at Ak Lu'um, I saw only respect for each child, joy, and a deep devotion to Waldorf education. It is a most impressive young school!

You can find further information about Ak Lu'um International School at www.akluum.com. If you are interested in forming a partnership with this school, giving a donation, or sponsoring a child, please contact the school at akluum@gmail.com. ♦

Louise deForest is a WECAN board member and regional representative for Mexico, and is one of two North American representatives to the IASWECE Council.



Photo courtesy of Louise deForest