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Kinal, a technical training center in Guatemala

Kinal began in 1961 with a group of bricklayers and carpenters in a poor area of Guatemala City. Today 700 young men are receiving technical training in the school to help them find work that will improve the economic situation of their family.

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Juan is studying welding at Kinal Training Center. He is 17 and lives with three younger brothers in a very basic rented apartment in Zone 7, one of the poorest areas of the capital of Guatemala. Juan's mother is illiterate and earns a living by selling corn tortillas. This is the only source of finances for the family and what she makes barely provides the basics.

Juan is one of the best students at the Training Center and chose to study welding so that he could quickly find work and help support his family. When he finishes his studies this year, he will get a training position that should quickly lead to a full-time job. It was for people like Juan that Kinal was founded, responding to a social need felt throughout the country.

Origin and goals

Kinal was born of the Christian zeal of some members of Opus Dei and their friends who were college students and young professionals. They wanted to contribute to the education of boys who did not have the opportunity of higher education. As a first step, they got together and organized a program of activities including personal and professional development, sports and spiritual formation. Then to help solve the educational vacuum for many of the workers who came to the Center, they organized short courses of training for carpenters, gardeners, retail workers, and electricians. They helped many workers with activities aimed at improving their work.

The purpose of Kinal is reflected in the meaning of the name, which is “place where fire was born” in Mayan. Kinal aims to be a point of ignition for all who pass through the center, thus contributing to the

construction of a more worthy and just society. It is designed to bring people out of poverty and increase their income, but also, and very basically, to care for the Christian formation of each person and their social improvement.

Kinal seeks to help young workers and adults attain a better standard of living through an integral formation, which lets them discover the supernatural value of ordinary life and which leads them to carry out their work well, for their own benefit, for that of their family and for that of society.

A roundabout path

For 25 years Kinal wandered through the poorer sections of Guatemala City. Its original organizers started by renting a small house. In 1970, a person who was helping Kinal found a house near the city dump, and there Kinal remained until 1984. In

1986 a lot was donated with a useful size and location and the Kinal Foundation was set up to facilitate fundraising for construction of a new training center.

In January of 1988, the Center moved into its new facilities. The location was perfect, a poor area but close to the intersection of two of the main roads of the city. More than 250,000 people live in the area, most of them under-employed: migrants from the countryside, laborers, or people trying to run small businesses. The facilities were designed specifically for technical training: electrical and electronic workshops, classrooms for technical drawing, automotive mechanics, refrigeration and industrial welding, a computer center. To facilitate the formation of the students and their families and the outward projection of the work of the Center, Kinal also has an

oratory, a general workshop, a cafeteria and areas for sports.

Technical training for youth and adults

In the daytime and in the evenings the facilities are used to train more than 700 young men between the ages of 15 and 20 who have not yet gained a marketable skill. These technical studies are officially recognized, and the students, after three years of study, receive a diploma as skilled technicians. If they wish they can also obtain a high school diploma. One of the students in this program is Marvin, who for the past year has traveled each day from San Juan Sacatepéquez, a town in the Guatemala District. Both he and his parents know that the effort to acquire a good technical and academic education is a competitive investment in the future.

Many companies have asked that these training courses be given in their own plants so that all their personnel can learn to work with greater efficiency. The personnel director of one company commented: “The boiler room had been the dirtiest place in the factory. I sent the operator of the furnaces to the course on steam boilers and, little by little, he began putting order into the place and scheduling the supply of fuel properly, so that now there are no overflows or spills, the place is very clean, and the cost of fuel has been greatly reduced.”

Honorio is one of the students who took a technical course in Kinal. He lives in Playa Grande, Quiché, one of the areas with the most armed conflict in the three decades of guerrilla warfare the country has gone through. To take part in the adult technical course, for three years he would leave his house

Friday night and arrive at four in the morning at Coban, where he took a bus to Guatemala City to arrive in time for an 8:00 a.m. Saturday class. After the classes, he would repeat his long journey home, arriving home early Sunday morning. Honorio, who is now a construction foreman and works in a construction company on a permanent basis, recalls his years at Kinal: “Everything that I learned was useful to me. I used it to teach my relatives and friends how to improve their homes. What I learned will last all my life.”

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