

WHAT VOLUNTEER TEACHERS SHOULD KNOW...

PROFILE OF MOUNT CARMEL HIGH and MOUNT CARMEL PARISH

Mount Carmel High School was established in 1990, by Father John S McHugh SOLT, as a prep school for the less inclined students from the low income bracket in the parish of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. It is grounded on Roman Catholic principles and on the constitutional rights of every youngster in the parish to have access to a high school education, regardless of race, religious preference, creed and economic background. As such, Mt. Carmel High School seeks to mould youngsters into individuals who, having engaged in nation-building will become active promoters of beauty and goodness, and witnesses to Truth.

The managing authorities of Mt. Carmel High School include the Board of Directors. The Pastor of Mt. Carmel Parish, the community, parents and teachers, and the Department of Education have a representation on the Board. Religious of the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity who manage Mt. Carmel Parish provide spiritual direction for the faculty, staff and students.

Mount Carmel High School serves the people of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Parish in the Cayo District, including other parishes in the immediate area (Close to 15% of the students belong to other parishes). Mount Carmel Parish encompasses the urban area of Benque Viejo del Carmen Town, and the out-stations of San Jose Succotz, Arenal and Calla Creek. The parish is located on the far west in Belize, in the Cayo District, at the Guatemalan border.

The parish consists of approximately 8,000 people of Spanish and Mayan ancestry. Benque Viejo alone has a population of 5088, of which close to 40% are under 14 years of age. According to the 2000 Census, only 11.6 % of the population in the area has managed to complete a high school education. Though the Cayo District is the fastest growing area in Belize and the most progressive, 57 % of the population has an annual income of less than Bz\$10,079.00

Currently Mount Carmel High School has an enrolment of 460 students and a staff of 24 Belizeans and 10 volunteer teachers. The school itself is lodged on a 1 ½ acre of land that originally housed a municipal pre-school. The facilities include six ferro-concrete buildings that house the administrative centre, 17 classrooms, the Science and Computer labs, a library, and a wood-work shop. An indoor basketball court complements the facilities. We are currently raising funds to rehabilitate our labs and make our food processing center functional for the new school year. Whatever donations, in kind or in money, that may suite the purpose will be most welcome.

HISTORY OF BENQUE VIEJO DEL CARMEN

Benque Viejo del Carmen was originally home to the Mayan civilization that flourished along the Belize Rive. Modern-day Benque Viejo traces its origins to a logging camp established by British mahogany cutters in 1847. It was first inhabited by Mayas and Peteneros from Guatemala, who were employed in the timber industry. As a matter of fact, the name “Benque Viejo” originates from the “Old Bank”, referring to the site of logging activities along the Mopan River, the eastern branch of the Belize River. Benque Viejo was a well established village in 1865. Two years after, it was burnt down by the Holmul Maya rebels form Peten, Guatemala. After negotiating and making all necessary arrangements with British Commissioner, Captain Edmund at Young Girl, Benque’s Alcalde, Genaro Castellanos and Samuel August began to rebuild Benque Viejo. By the end of 1867, the mahogany camps were rebuilt. In 1868 a group of people from Yaloch, Peten under the leadership of Jose Justo Chan arrived in Benque. Joining the wave of immigrants were the Yucatecos (residents of Yucatan, Mexico), who fled during the Caste War towards Peten via Tabasco. History relates that in 1875 Mr. Felipe Novelo, a resident of Merida, Mexico, arrived in Benque to produce liquor and established himself by the Mopan River, with the permission of Icaiche commandant, Asuncion Eck, who insisted that Benque was Mexican territory.

In 1882 Benque was more Mestizo than Mayan in culture. On the eve of the 20th Century, migration of Guatemalans to Benque Viejo increased due to the military repression of Guatemalan Presidents, Manuel Lisandro Barrias and Manuel Estrada Cabrera.

The timber industry gave way to the chicle production thus attracting even more Peteneros, who were seeking employment. Benque Viejo was declared a town in October 1904 and became the economic and commercial hub of the Cayo District, surpassing San Ignacio, the neighboring town, in importance. As Benque Viejo flourished, it became the bridge between Flores, Peten and the Port of Belize.

Benque Viejo celebrated its first municipal fair in July 1967; it was inaugurated by Hon. George Price (Premier of Belize). It was in this special event that Hon. Price added “del Carmen” to Benque Viejo, in honour of its patron saint, Our Lady of Mount Carmel. The town recently celebrated its centennial with glamour and pride focusing on its culture and history represented in the full colour of tradition and folklore, typical of the Mestizo (Spanish and Mayan) people.

LIVELIHOOD

The majority of Benqueños earn a living by seeking employment outside of their hometown. Some may be found working in the citrus orchards of Middlesex and Pomona in the Stann Creek District. Others are employed in the tourism industry in San Pedro (Ambergris Caye) and Belize City as cooks, waitresses, bartenders, hotel managers and tour guide operators. There is a high rate of migration to the USA especially among high school graduates. A great number of Benqueños are highly-trained professionals employed by the public and private sectors in the larger urban areas. Undoubtedly, one can find skilled men and women who operate their own businesses in their backyards. These include welders, driver-mechanics, seamstresses, pastry makers, food and ice vendors, and shopkeepers. Few men in the village are engaged in subsistence farming. Most of the adult populace is employed, but a large number of young people still remain unemployed since job opportunities are very limited. Though crime has had its toll in the Belizean society, Benque Viejo remains one of the safest urban communities in Belize.

FACILITIES

1. Six recreational parks
2. Four basketball courts
3. Two football (soccer) fields
4. Five restaurants
5. Six Supermarkets
6. One Cable Station
7. The Water and treatment plan provides the communities of Benque and Neighboring Succotz with potable water.
8. Hydro electric plant (near Benque)

AGENCIES AND INSTITUTIONS

1. Three primary schools
2. Two secondary schools
3. One pre-school
4. One Credit Union
5. One Western Union Office
6. Money changers: mainly located at the Western border with Guatemala
7. One government health centre
8. 4 Private health centres
9. Pro-life Counseling Center
10. House of Culture
11. Post Office

LEGAL STATUS IN BELIZE

A volunteer who holds a US or Canadian Passport, does not need a visa. He/she can enter the country as a tourist and Mt. Carmel School will arrange for a teaching visa. If the applicant is from some other country, she/he needs to check what is required.

HEALTH & MEDICAL SERVICE

1. Volunteers do need to look into shots for Belize. The tetanus vaccination for the last ten years is recommended. Belize has had a few isolated cases of malaria and dengue, mostly in the rural areas. We discourage, however, the use of malaria pills which has proven harmful if used over an extended period of time.
2. The volunteer programme does not offer medical insurance while in Belize, but we recommend for volunteers to look into an extended health care policy that covers extreme medical cases while in Belize. Access to good family practitioners is available and very affordable. Volunteers are well taken care of by the medical community here. Access to good medical facilities is available in Belize City, while local facilities are adequate for most situations. A person on medication is required to make his/her arrangements for its provision while in Belize.

COMMODITIES

Belize has a dry weather that extends from March to June followed by the rainy season from July to December. Temperatures oscillate between 80-100° F in the dry season. The hottest and most humid months are August, September and October. Nonetheless, the climate and general surroundings are healthy. Belize boasts pristine forests and clean rivers and lakes in the interior.

1. The food is good, the water potable and safe for drinking, and teacher housing rather nice, though not luxurious (note: there is no warm water for showering.) Males and females are housed in different quarters and modest meals are served in common for all at the rectory.
2. There are washing machines at each teacher's house. There are little or no kitchen facilities in most of the teachers' houses.
3. Volunteers have access to phones, e-mail and good postal service. Access to computers is somewhat limited and you may **consider bringing your own laptop.**
4. The cost of telephone is very expensive in Belize. All teachers are required to cover their own telephone bills within and outside Belize. The school offers free internet access to teachers and students. You may consider opening an account using an international credit card to call home via Skype or any form of VOI (in which case you may also need to bring a headphone & mic). In recent years some volunteers have opted to bring a cell phone from the USA and utilize a chip from Guatemala which offers lower international rates.
5. Belize has a fairly safe and decent public transport. The school does not have a vehicle and cannot afford to put one at the disposal of its staff, especially for trips of leisure. We are committed to transport volunteer teachers to and from the airport when required.

DIET

The diet is a simple one. Vegetarians should be advised that while it is possible to avoid meats here, their diet will be without much variety, yet healthy. There will not be special meals prepared in this sense for those wishing special foods, nor are teachers encouraged to cook their own food at the rectory. What is served is served.

CLOTHING

Male teachers are requested to wear shirts with collars and long pants (no jeans) when teaching (refer to **Code of Dress** in **Teachers' Handbook**). Light cotton is highly recommended.

Female teachers are requested to wear modest skirts/dresses with blouses, and slippers (refer to **Code of Dress** in **Teachers' Handbook**) –jeans pants are not allowed. Modest shorts, slacks and t-shirts are allowed off duty (However, pants and skirts are a must at all times in the rectory).

Volunteers are encouraged to bring sturdy shoes, tennis shoes and rain coat. You are responsible of bringing sheets, pillow cases, towels, and one or two light blankets for the colder nights. A mosquito net for a single bed is often useful. Cosmetics, deodorants and other toiletry items should not be brought in excess. These are available here in Benque Viejo (A weekly stipend of BZ \$25.00 - US. \$12.50 is given to a volunteer teacher in his/her first year). You are advised to be conservative in what you bring, bearing in mind that you may be going home for Christmas and can pick up other items then.

ARRIVALS/DEPARTURES

Once travel arrangements have been finalized, volunteers are requested to notify Mt. Carmel High School (Tel: 501-8232535/ 501-823-2331 or Mount Carmel Church 501-823-2024). so that we may meet you at arrival at the Phillip Goldson International Airport in Belize City, 80 miles from Benque Viejo.

- Volunteer teachers are expected to be in Belize by Sunday August 19, 2007 for Orientation scheduled to begin on Monday, August 20.
- Christmas Break: December 17, 2007 to January 6, 2008.
- Easter Break: March 17-30, 2008.
- Classes end June 5, 2008

TRAVEL/EXPLORATION WHILE IN BELIZE

It is a greatly enriching experience to travel while in Belize to experience the beauty of the country and her cultural riches. There are various opportunities throughout the year during long weekends and Christmas and Easter holidays for travel. However, teachers are advised ahead of time that their duties as a Mount Carmel teacher are their first obligation. Extended vacations and time away from school is frowned upon and causes disruptions to the school life. Thus, travel should not interfere with teaching; this includes planning classes as well. If one must miss a day of school it need be made known to the school principal and classes should be duly covered with adequate material left for the class to work on. Furthermore, behaviour during travel should behoove the social expectations of a teacher in Belize, which are high. One is seen throughout the country as a teacher and the public here in Belize expects appropriate Catholic behaviour from her teachers at all times.

JOB DESCRIPTION AND EXPECTATIONS

Volunteers are expected to be in line with the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church and to observe the code of behavior at the work place and outside.

Volunteers should be prepared to teach an average of 15 classes per week, each class being 60 minutes long. The school day extends from 7:55 am to 2:40 pm. And teachers are required to be in school by 7:45 a.m. and be available to students after classes. Teachers are expected to work closely with Department Heads and Management having their lesson plans and grade book available for inspection; in-class supervision and evaluation takes place at least twice during the school year.

In addition, teachers are expected to assist in Home-Room duties which include daily attendance check, report cards (filling in grades and distributing at the end of the term), supervising community service and fund-raisers, and being available to students and parents after regular class.

There is also a range of clubs and extracurricular activities including Sports, Science, Arts and Campus Ministry which teachers are asked to coordinate and get involved in after classes. Supervision of detentions among other duties, like mentoring and substituting for teachers, will be assigned from time to time.

ALCOHOL

There are legitimate reasons for having a beer or two. Excessive drinking, however, is reason for scandal and is not condoned. Having beer, or other alcoholic beverages in moderate quantities, is allowed at the living quarters. Hanging out in bars is, again, cause for scandal. To have a beer or two with a meal is perfectly legitimate, but please do not hang out drinking in any restaurant or bar. Some places in the area are not fit for Catholics, especially those that have begun to promote strippers, prostitution and drugs (a listing will be provided at Orientation).

GROWING IN FELLOWSHIP

Females and males are housed in different homes. Your teaching experience in Belize will enable you to establish life-long relationships with other people. A word of caution: no one is to spend the night in a house of the opposite sex. However innocent the reason may be, it is, again, cause for scandal in the community. Your experience in Belize should allow you to mature in the Trinitarian relationship enabling you to live the love of the Triune God at work, at home and in the marketplace. We expect all volunteers to grow in holiness and respect towards the traditions of the Church, and highly encourage Catholics to frequent the sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion.

VISITORS

Teachers in the past have entertained family members and friends here at the mission. Please be advised of the following:

- All visitors are responsible (or the host teacher) for arranging travel to and from the international airport (the mission vehicles are not to be used for this purpose) and for accommodations (if one is planning on housing a friend in their own house it must be cleared with all housemates AND the guest should be a friend of the same sex – we cannot be having women staying a men’s houses or vice versa).
- One of the priests should be notified well in advance of the arrival of a visitor.
- The visit of a friend/family member is *not* a legitimate reason to be excused from classes in order to travel etc. They ought to realize they are visiting the mission to experience life here.

TIPS and GENERAL ADVICE

Volunteer teachers do well to keep in mind that they are coming to teach at a mission school and will therefore be serving a people with a distinct culture and history. This means, although much is in place and working well, there is much still in flux/chaos from time to time. Often, in the missions unforeseen things easily arise. Thus, teachers do well in being prepared, flexible and adaptable, ready to go outside of their area of expertise and perhaps of their “comfort zone” in order to do whatever is needed. Cooperation and respect towards the spirituality of the people are keys to our success – leaving one’s “ego” at home and coming with an attitude of service is indispensable!

May God bless and keep you as you embark in this singular journey to a land where God has one again set up his tent among his people!

Peace.