

Guatemalan group swaps stories, learns lessons in U.S.

By **STEPHEN NIELSEN**
The Winchester Star

WINCHESTER — Representatives of the Guatemalan faith-based group Faith Stories Project are, for the first time, in the United States to meet with churches and talk about hurdles women face in their country.

In 2003, Jennifer Thalman Kepler, community outreach director for the Looking for Lilith Theatre Company in Louisville, Ky., spent a year in Guatemala teaching literacy and leadership skills to women while on a mission for the Presbyterian Church.

That was the first step in what would lead to the Faith Stories Project of Guatemala — a group of Guatemalan women who, using theater skills, are community leaders dedicated to teaching a largely undereducated and underappreciated female population about important issues like nutrition, self-advocacy and domestic violence.

"Their mission is to tell the unheard stories of women," said Carolyn Thalman, mother of Jennifer and a member of First Presbyterian Church in Winchester.

According to Thalman, many women in Guatemala have little education and are considered second class.

The group relies on visual



Photo provided by Holly Stone

Marta Lydia Salanic Ramirez, Magdalena Diaz, Marina Monterreso, Euriamis Losada (Ricky in the Broadway series show "I Love Lucy Live on Stage"), Juana Herlinda Yac and Alicia Moscoso pose together during their visit to the U.S.

methods like theater and verbal story-telling to teach lessons to women.

First Presbyterian works with

Looking For Lilith, and it was mission work for the church that took Jennifer to Guatemala.

Now, for the first time since the

group's inception, five of the women have come to America to see some of the sights and to share their stories.

In their own towns and churches, each of the women has tried to make a difference, despite many obstacles, Carolyn Thalman said.

"It's been a dream of these women to come to the states to visit us," she said.

The group of five who made the trip were Juana Herlinda Yac, Marina Monterreso, Alicia Moscoso, Marta Lydia Salanic Ramirez and Magdalena Diaz.

"We've enjoyed our time here," Yac said, via Jennifer who acted as translator for the group. "It's been very educational. It's helped us build up the leadership we need in our communities."

The group arrived in the U.S. on Oct. 4, to visit Looking for Lilith in Kentucky. There, they visited several theaters, took part in workshops with the Lilith company and met with groups of Latino women to share their stories.

Next they came to Winchester, where they led a worship at First Presbyterian, located at 116 S. Loudoun St.

They also led several workshops telling their stories and teaching women to tell their own stories using theater. They also visited Winchester Day Preschool and Highland Food Pantry, both of which are missions supported by First Presbyterian.

The group also visited Shenandoah National Park to view fall colors.

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In their last stop, they spent a few days in Fairfax. There, they held more workshops. They also spent a day in Washington D.C., visiting the Washington Monument, American Indian Museum and the Kennedy Center.

On their final day, Sunday, they will lead a worship at Fairfax Presbyterian Church.

"Before, maybe, we had this idea that people in the



We know that change will not be easy, but if we don't start it [no one will]

— **Juana Herlinda Yac**
Representative, Faith Stories Project of Guatemala

United States don't go through crises," Yac said. "The needy is a universal problem. We've also seen how members of this church are helping."

After seeing the differ-

ent kind of mission work they do, Yac said their group has a better idea of how they'll be able to help their own communities.

"I felt content [on this trip,]" Diaz said. "I go to a

big church in Guatemala that also has help for widowed women. But here [the help they give] is much bigger. It doesn't matter what language or what race they are."

According to the group members, they all plan to bring new ideas to their work in educating local women.

"We know that change will not be easy, but if we don't start it [no one will]," Yac said.

— Contact Stephen Nielsen at sn Nielsen@winchesterstar.com

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