

Liza Grandia

Assistant Professor of International Development and Social Change

LIZA GRANDIA HAS DEVOTED THE LAST 15 years to NGO programs, activism, and research in Petén, Guatemala, mostly all affiliated with a Guatemalan NGO called ProPetén to which she describes herself as “fiercely devoted.” Grandia has served virtually every role in ProPetén, from village extensionist to president of the board of directors, working with donors on many scales from small family foundations to the World Bank.

The content of her work has varied over the years – from reproductive health, medicinal plants, organic agriculture, advocacy on petroleum issues, and most recently, indigenous land rights. Grandia states, “What connects all these subjects is a desire on my part to expand the agenda of biodiversity conservation to a broader vision of environmental justice.”

Over the last several years, she’s even been working with ProPetén on a bilingual radio-soap opera in Q’eqchi’ and Spanish that airs daily across the northern Guatemalan territory. Titled, “At a Crossroads,” it’s a social soap opera about an ordinary settler village in Petén. Having acquired a devoted listenership among both men and women, the show gradually began engaging more controversial social and cultural themes ranging from: family planning, domestic violence, conservation, forest fires, archaeological poaching, migration, gender equity, infant mortality, etc. Over the next year, they want to start integrating agrarian issues more explicitly into the program. In helping ProPetén to branch into mass education, her hypothesis was that informal education through radio would be much more effective than typical NGO-style workshops.

When deciding to come to Clark, Grandia saw IDCE as a department where she could be her entire self, devoting her time both to research and activism. She states, “I love the interdisciplinary energy of IDCE—it’s so much more intellectually invigorating than splitting hairs about the nuances of Foucault in an isolated anthropology department.”

When describing her professional experience, Grandia says, “A lot of people make distinctions between ‘applied’ and ‘scholarly’ work. For me, that’s a false dichotomy. My

scholarship benefits from my engagement, and my engagement is more strategic when rooted in scholarship.”

Having spent 2006 immersed in rural issues in Yale’s Program in Agrarian Studies, she decided to continue that thread in her first semester of teaching. Along the way, she encouraged her IDCE students to make their way through the “drudgery” of reading Chayanov in “Peasants, Rural Development and Agrarian Change” because she feels that “in a field like agrarian studies, it’s essential to understand foundational texts.” The class was more than just a survey of the “peasant” literature—instead, what she tried to do was to use historic debates about this ambiguous class of people called “peasants” (who are both simultaneously workers and owners) to think about the resiliency and creativity of the subsistence or “informal” economy. She feels strongly that it’s important for her students to get the opportunity to read old texts so they learn to recognize intellectual continuities across generations and develop an ability to distinguish between jargon and new ideas.

She is excited to be teaching a new undergraduate course called, “Controlling Capitalism: Another World Is Possible,” which uses an ethnographic lens to critically examine corporate, consumer culture in the United States. While anthropologists have traditionally viewed culture as a deep unchanging structure, this course considers the malleability and fragility of the human mind as the last frontier of neoliberalism. For IDCE this class is an important critique of the implicit model of “development” that U.S. aid agencies had encouraged so many other countries to emulate.

Outside of the classroom, her research focuses mainly on monitoring the impacts of World Bank loans for “market-assisted” agrarian reform in Guatemala while waiting for her ethnography to be reviewed by a university press. “Our hope is to find ways to mobilize mass education tools to pass along information to Q’eqchi’ communities so they



understand their customary rights before the World Bank technicians arrive and try to convince them otherwise.” In the long term, she hopes to expand this important research on the World Bank to another country outside of Latin America.

While the agrarian situation of the Q’eqchi’ people in Guatemala appears bleak, their neighbors across the border

in Belize celebrated a major victory on October 2, 2007, winning a Supreme Court victory for indigenous land rights. Grandia served as a critical expert witness in describing the cultural and ecological significance of customary land management and was quoted directly by Belize’s Chief Justice in his verdict. On October 18, 2007, the Supreme Court of Belize issued a landmark decision affirming the rights of the indigenous Maya communities of Belize to their traditional lands and resources and declaring those rights protected by the Constitution of Belize in light of relevant international law. According to Professor S. James Anaya, “this seminal judgment constitutes the most far reaching application of international law by a domestic court to recognize the rights of indigenous groups to their traditional lands and resources.” Significantly, this is the first court judgment ever to apply the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted by the U.N. General Assembly on September 13, 2007. Grandia is proud to have played such an integral part in writing the affidavits in support of the indigenous people.

To get others involved in such advocacy work, she has established a virtual Q’eqchi’ Scholars Network to bring together electronically various people engaged in research in the Q’eqchi’ area (both Guatemala and Belize). For Grandia, fruits of the network came home. “To my surprise and delight, one of the incoming Master’s students was a Peace Corps volunteer in the Q’eqchi’ area and speaks fluent Q’eqchi’. You could probably count on two hands the number of North Americans who do, so it’s a great coincidence that we are both at Clark!”