January 2007 marked the Fifth Anniversary of Lasell College’s Mexico Shoulder to Shoulder International Service Learning Exchange.

This year, ten (10) Lasell undergraduates went to live and work in Mexico for 13 days.

Our goal is educational and our method experiential. Through cultural immersion and community service projects, students are exposed to complex issues of global economics and social justice and they gain new respect and cultural sensitivity for our neighbors’ culture, history and lifestyle. We work to train and educate students who will one day take the lead in creating just international relations.

**Home construction for a family of seventeen:** This year, in Coatepec, we razed a shanty that housed a family of six (6) adults and eleven (11) children, and we replaced it with a sturdy cement-block home. The effort galvanized family, neighbors and city businesses who contributed both labor and materials to the project. Our students not only learned much about the hardworking Colorado Yoval family while building their house, but they came to understand the many factors that sustained their poverty.

**Founding a library at a boys’ home:** In Orizaba, we continued our work with the boys’ home that provides a permanent residence for children who suffered violence in their family of origin. Money raised by Brennan librarian Lydia Pittman purchased over a hundred books and instructional cds for the boys, establishing the orphanage’s first library. We also traveled once again to the indigenous village of Altlahuilco for a day of interaction with school children and painting with the parent’s organization.
Fifth anniversary ceremony and scholarship presentation: In celebration of our Fifth Anniversary, we held a special ceremony in Mexico to formally recognize the many committed partners, businesses, officials and families who have made Shoulder to Shoulder a success. Among the many speeches and awards, we singled out Founding Director Professor Helen Alcalá for special praise. Without her five years of visionary leadership, Shoulder to Shoulder would not exist in the form it does today. The clear highlight of this same ceremony was the recognition of 11 sixth graders who have earned small scholarships from Lasell’s student-run non-profit “Niños de Veracruz” (Children of Veracruz). The small awards enable students to stay in school for seventh grade, a point at which many otherwise drop out to work in the coffee and sugar cane fields with their parents.

Faculty professional development in Mexico: We were fortunate to have Lasell’s Director of the Center for Community-Based Learning, Professor Sharyn Lowenstein, traveling with us this year on a faculty grant, as well as Brennan librarian Lydia Pittman. They bear witness to the depth of learning that took place on this year’s trip.

Education teams: Our students returned with new energy, and they have taken it on themselves to establish “education teams” that have visited ten (10) classrooms at Lasell to share what they have learned about Mexican culture and families, the sources of poverty, and the barriers to education in Mexico. These education teams have presented in courses such as Criminal Justice, Social Policy, Literature of Human Rights, Business Ethics, Art, Race and Ethnicity and more.

Fulbright scholar and faculty in residence from Mexico: Each year has brought new developments in what is now a rich and multifaceted year-round relationship with our two study sites in Mexico. For the first time this year, for instance, Lasell has been able to return the hospitality of our Mexican partners. Four of our Mexico program coordinators traveled to the US to spend short and long term stays in Massachusetts, studying, presenting, or teaching at Lasell College. Dulce Brenda Méndez, Reyna Hernández, Professor Cuca López, and Fulbright Scholar Teresa Romero were all visible and active presences on campus. This opportunity
for truly reciprocal cultural exchange not only deepens the commitment and understanding of our Mexican partners, but it extends the program’s impact on faculty and students at Lasell immeasurably.

**Developing new international service-learning opportunities:** One example of this extended impact would be the new International Service Learning Think Tank we’ve established at Lasell. This is a group of faculty almost all of whom have traveled with Mexico Shoulder to Shoulder. They are devoted to designing and promoting other international service and education programs based on the Mexico model. These inventive and committed educators are now laying foundations for study sites in Nicaragua, Italy, and London.

**Fifth Year Alumni Reunion:**
Mexico Shoulder to Shoulder held its first reunion party this year, honoring Cinco de Mayo and five years of Shoulder to Shoulder alumni. Twenty students and faculty, representing participants from each year of the program’s existence met on May 4. We laughed and reminisced and swapped advice on careers. Many of our alums are now studying for their Masters degrees in Social Work, and many are working for national or local non-profits as well as the Department of Social Services in Massachusetts.

Mexico Shoulder to Shoulder is rightly proud of the partnerships and participants that have made it the singular experience it is. We are proud, too, of the way the program has developed in just five years time, and we look forward to an exciting future.

Stephanie Athey
Associate Professor of English