

From corporate ladder to nonprofit

04-23-2008

Brothers supply books to 10% of Guatemala's kids

You're sitting in your cubicle, it's the middle of the afternoon. You're staring out the window, daydreaming about leaving your corporate job behind to pursue your dream, of helping people in a far-off land.

Then reality sets in. What about leases, car payments, the corporate ladder?

Joe and Jeff Berninger made the leap and left corporate America behind more than 12 years ago to follow a dream of helping others.

In the early '90s, Joe had taken a leave of absence from his marketing job at IBM to embark on a trip around the world.



Stephanie Romine

Then, Jeff left his systems analyst position at Procter & Gamble for a project publishing textbooks in native languages in Guatemala. Both brothers had visited and became captivated by the rich, indigenous culture in the Central American country.

Today, they run Cooperative for Education, a nonprofit with a \$1.8 million budget that supplies textbooks to 10 percent of Guatemalan schoolchildren.

Guatemala, a country of about 13 million, has an illiteracy rate of 70 percent in rural areas, according to CoEd. About 90 percent of schools don't have books.

The nonprofit started informally in one school, in a town called La Labor, and helped 180 kids.

"We started with one subject, math," Jeff, 39, said. "People said, 'That's never going to work. They're never going to return the books.'"

That first year, 98 percent of the books were returned, and almost as many are returned today, though they now help more than 35,000 secondary school students.

Rather than donate books, CoEd sets up self-sustaining textbook library and



Provided photo

Joe Berninger, executive director of Cooperative for Education, passes out books to kids in Guatemala. CoEd, a nonprofit with a \$1.8 million budget, supplies textbooks to 10 percent of Guatemalan schoolchildren.

computer center programs within schools. Students pay a nominal fee, which helps keep the program running.

CoEd is thriving in its second decade – a major feat for nonprofits, the brothers say – and with headquarters in Oakley and Guatemala City, they employ 30 people, with three more positions being created in their local office.

"It took a number of years to get the program up to size and give it the solidity it needed to run on its own," said Jeff, who lives in Green Township.

For the first five years, family members and friends thought they'd return to corporate life when they wanted to settle down. Both brothers have gotten married (Jeff even met his wife, Johanna, in Guatemala) had kids and grew the organiza-

tion.

Family life has changed their roles. Jeff now spends three months a year in Guatemala, and Joe – who focuses on fundraising in North America – spends about three weeks there.

They rely on private donations, with Rotary International clubs being their No. 1 donors. Jeff's former employer, P&G, provided the founding grant, and other local companies, including Chiquita, have donated over the years.

They also take donors on tours of Guatemala twice a year – to tour the country and to help deliver books.

"Early on, we realized that to build our base, we needed to get people to go down and see the kids and see our schools," said Joe, who lives in Mount Lookout.

Spending time in Guatemala puts all those daily life stresses in perspective, said Jeff. And the mission is not just to change the lives of students but to change the lives of donors as well.

Eighty-eight cents of every dollar donated goes straight to the programs.

"We never take anything for granted, but every year the organization gets a little more solid," said Joe, 40.

For more information on Cooperative for Education, visit www.coeduc.org.

Know someone in the Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky area who has found passion in his or her work? Contact freelance writer and editor Stephanie Romine at stephanieromine@yahoo.com or 859-640-2127.

Ponder buyouts carefully

As corporate buyouts surge during economic uncertainty, what should eligible employees consider before accepting?

With large portions of payrolls approaching retirement age, companies are seeing buyouts as a way to fine-tune their work force without shutting down a department or handing out pink slips, according to job placement consultancy Challenger, Gray & Christmas.

Employees in the automotive, airline, technology and retail industries are seeing the most buyouts, the Chicago-based company said.

While receiving a large sum to leave a job may seem like hitting the jackpot, there are a few questions to consider:

■ Will involuntary layoffs follow the buyout offer? Decide how confident you are that you will survive these job cuts.

■ What other job prospects are there in your region and in your occupation? Leaving your job may require training in another field.

■ What will change for those who stay with the company? There may be other cost-saving measures that will affect employees who stay.

'Mental health' days off common in workplace

Feel like you're going crazy? Maybe you need a day off.

More than 80 percent of employees admit to taking "mental health" days from work to recover or recharge, according to a poll conducted by ComPsych Corp., which provides corporate counseling services. Almost a third said family and relationship issues were the cause.

When asked what would likely cause them to take a breather, 20 percent said it would be stress related to work and 12 percent said they would take time off due to lack of physical energy. Boredom and lack of motivation accounted for 5 percent of those who would take an unplanned day. The online survey polled 1,036 employees of ComPsych's company clients.

— By Erin Conroy,
The Associated Press