

MARCH: LITERACY MONTH

Rotarians empower Guatemala's children with books, computers

U.S. Rotarian Glenn Chamberlain has traveled to Guatemala 11 times since 2000. His visits are supporting a decade-old literacy project that is helping impoverished schoolchildren sharpen their reading and computer skills.

A member of the Rotary Club of Ephrata, Washington, Chamberlain travels to the country's poor rural areas to identify schools that can benefit from the self-sustaining Guatemala Literacy Project, or GLP. Months later, he returns with a team of Rotarians and other volunteers to deliver the needed textbooks, computers, and other supplies. More than 260 Rotary clubs in North and Central America support the project, in partnership with the U.S.-based nonprofit Cooperative for Education.

"We are targeting the Mayan population, who are the poorest of the poor," says Chamberlain, who is one of the project's coordinators. "The vast number of people living in the country have no electricity and indoor plumbing. Without literacy, they will never be able to have a better life."

Torn by three decades of civil war, Guatemala has been suffering from one of the highest illiteracy rates in the Western Hemisphere. A 2003 study by the World Bank found an illiteracy rate as high as 60 percent in rural Guatemala, compared to the country's overall rate of 30 percent.



Rotarian Glenn Chamberlain (left) greets children during a trip to an elementary school in rural Guatemala. About 23,500 students have received a better education from the Guatemala Literacy Project since it began in 1996.

But that's changing. The GLP has cut the dropout rate in half at participating schools, according to a 2005 study by Marroquin University in Guatemala City. The year-long study of 10 schools notes that students "experience increased interest in their schoolwork as a result of having access to books," allowing them to study at home.

Since the GLP started in 1996, Rotarians and their partners have delivered more than 120,000 math, science, language, and social studies textbooks to about 23,500 Spanish-speaking students in 135 schools. The project has also established 17 mini-libraries and 16 computer centers, which are providing 8,700 high school students with the skills they need to secure technology-based jobs that

will lift them out of poverty.

Chamberlain says the GLP owes its longevity to strong Rotarian support and the project's self-sustaining system. Each student pays a small annual fee to rent four textbooks and use a computer center. The money is placed in a five-year revolving fund that is used to replace worn-out books and equipment.

The project's success has attracted other donors, including Microsoft, which in April presented a US\$255,000 grant for computers and software.

Find project information and sign up for book delivery tours at www.guatemalaliteracy.org.