

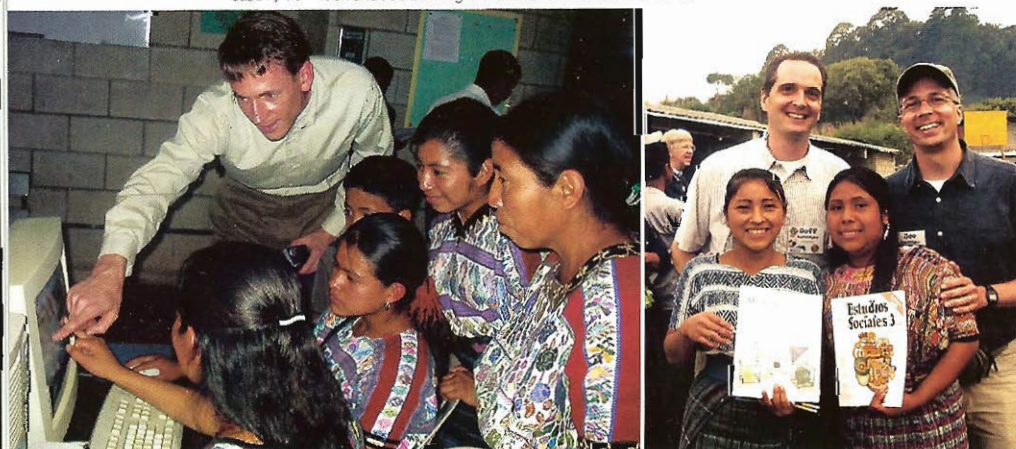
Changing Lives with Books

BY ERIN MARSH, Associate Editor



A simple vacation to Guatemala led to something much more for Hyde Park brothers Joe and Jeff Berninger.

ABOVE AND BELOW, LEFT: Guatemalan students benefit from books and computers.
BELOW, RIGHT: Jeff and Joe Berninger with two Guatemalan students.



Instead of the beautiful landscapes and tropical atmosphere, what really caught the attention of Hyde Park brothers Joe and Jeff Berninger on their vacation to Guatemala was the severity of the locals' poverty.

Although the locale presented natural beauty, the brothers were overwhelmed by the complete lack of everyday necessities. Joe Berninger said he was "absolutely blown away by the poverty." He said he "wanted to do something to respond to the poverty."

They returned home and thought about what they could do. Jeff left his job at Procter & Gamble, Inc. and traveled to Guatemala as a volunteer in 1994. Although he did not speak any Spanish, he decided to visit for three months. He stayed for 11 years.

Jeff traveled to a school in Guatemala City and asked how he could help. The school needed him to teach students the English language. The first thing Jeff asked when he entered the school was "where are the books?" He soon realized that the school had no books at all. Jeff understood that the best way he could help the students and teachers was to start a book program.

Jeff asked Procter & Gamble for help and the company granted him with \$5,000 to launch the program. Jeff wanted the book program to be a self-financing project, so each student paid a \$2 rental fee for a book for one year. Other area schools learned of the program and

wanted to join. With eager students and a mission on his mind, Jeff created the Cooperative for Education program.

Jeff asked his brother, Joe, to join his endeavor in 1996 and together they began operating a U.S. office in Hyde Park. Jeff moved back to the U.S. after 11 years and had a mission to dramatically improve the education for Guatemalan children. Joe said that the book program helps children improve their reading skills and cover 30 percent more material with books.

The brothers have also begun a computer program and the children pay to rent a computer lab. "Students are more excited about learning when they have books and computer centers; we've seen that this motivates them to attend school," Jeff said.

The Berninger brothers grew up in rural Indiana where their father was a science teacher for 30 years. Joe said they learned that they could move up in life because "education is the tool to a better life." In Guatemala, education is a "transformative tool to break the cycle of poverty," Joe said.

Joe sees the rewards of his endeavor when he travels to Guatemala each February with 75 people, many of whom live in Hyde Park. They meet the families and see firsthand the program's success.

The Berninger brothers have the mission of breaking the cycle of poverty through education in Guatemala and their mission is truly an amazing one. "I get a lot of satisfaction that I am making a measurable difference in the world," Joe said.