

Life & Style

Section D

Sunday, April 12, 2009
www.rapidcityjournal.com



Courtesy photos

Francis Johnson of Rapid City, center, poses with two students from the La Colina School in Guatemala. Johnson, 71, spent 10 days in Guatemala with the nonprofit Cooperative for Education.

Textbook tour

'Voluntourists' see sites, deliver books

By Stephanie Romine
Special to the Journal

Francis and Ilene Johnson are quite the globetrotters. They head south to Mexico for a few weeks each winter, have taken two world cruises and have spent plenty of time soaking up the sun on other cruises.

In late February, they again headed south to add another stamp to their nearly full passports: Guatemala.

But instead of lying on a beach, climbing Mayan ruins or exploring the jungles, as most tourists to that Central American country do, they had a slightly different itinerary. They spent days traveling to remote villages and delivering textbooks to schools whose classrooms previously had little more than chairs, a blackboard and a stubby piece of chalk.

The Johnsons handed out pens and pencils to students and parents in Guatemala. Ilene Johnson presented books to school officials in three villages and even participated in a traditional Mayan dance during one stop.

The Rapid City couple were "voluntourists" — part volunteers, part tourists — on a textbook delivery tour with a nonprofit based in Cincinnati called Cooperative for Education.

They learned about CoEd — and the tour — through Ed and Suzanne McCarter of

See **GUATEMALA**, Page D3

About Guatemala

Guatemala is a country about the size of Ohio in Central America.

Bordered to the north and west by Mexico, the east by Belize and the south by El Salvador and Honduras, Guatemala has a population of about 4.5 million.

Guatemala has the second highest illiteracy rate in the Western Hemisphere, after Haiti.

Guatemala City takes 70 percent of the country's meager education budget; the illiteracy rate in rural Guatemala is 75 percent, the highest in Latin America.

In rural Guatemala, women complete an average of two years of school; men complete an average of three years.

About 75 percent of the country lives below the poverty line, on less than \$5 a day.

Source: Cooperative for Education



Ilene Johnson of Rapid City participates in a traditional Mayan dance at the Tzanibacabaj School in Guatemala. Johnson, 66, was helping the nonprofit organization CoEd deliver textbooks, which were the school's first.

GUATEMALA: Couple spends vacation delivering textbooks.

From Page D1

Cincinnati, who volunteer with the nonprofit. After learning how much the Johnsons like to travel, the McCarters convinced them to come along on.

"We were on the world cruise with them in 2008 for four months," Francis Johnson, 71, said about meeting the McCarters. "We had some free time, so away we went!"

In addition to visiting schools, meeting scholarship students and participating in inauguration ceremonies for the program that bring out entire towns, the Johnsons and the others on the tour spent a weekend at volcano-ringed Lake Atitlan, and another weekend in Antigua, Guatemala's colonial capital. Voluntourism, after all, is about tourism as much as it is about volunteering.

Ilene Johnson, 66, said she loved the "quaintness" of the villages they visited along the lake and was blown away by the well-preserved beauty of Antigua. But what really struck her was visiting the children.

"I was surprised by how warm and friendly the children were," said Ilene, who is retired from the trust department of Wells Fargo. "They just wanted to be beside you. They just

looked up to you with a look in their eye, just saying 'thank you.' They were just so excited about things that so many of our children take for granted — a book or a pencil. They just got so excited over that! And they learned so fast. They just soaked it up like a sponge because they want it so desperately." Francis, who worked for 27 years as a civil engineer, most at Ellsworth Air Force Base, was equally struck by the students and the schools, especially after seeing the "chalk and talk" method that most teachers relied on before the CoEd programs. Without books, teachers literally just stand at the board, write and talk.

Guatemala, they learned, has the second lowest literacy rate in the Western Hemisphere, behind Haiti. The steep price of schooling — up to \$500 per child by junior high — is too much for most rural families, who earn less than \$5 a day. As a result, most rural women in Guatemala get two years of formal schooling; men get about three.

"Meeting the children and getting to see the book presentations — things like that, the normal tourist just doesn't understand," said Francis.

In addition to textbook tours, CoEd sets up literacy and computer programs in Guatemalan schools. Founded in 1996 by Joe and Jeff Berninger, two brothers who left careers at IBM and Procter

& Gamble, CoEd began by providing textbooks to one school in a tiny village in the central part of the country.

Today, CoEd serves 10 percent of the country's schools — 195 to date — and have helped more than 30,000 students since its inception. CoEd donates textbooks for four

subjects — Spanish, social studies, math, and science — and the students pay a small rental fee of about \$9 each year. By the end of five years, those rental fees have garnered enough money for the schools that they can expand the program, buy new books for more grades — or even buy

a computer. The schools become independent, though CoEd still provides resources and helps the schools manage their money.

The Johnsons haven't decided whether they'll return to Guatemala, but say they'll keep spreading the word about the textbook tour.

"We've talked about (the trip) to a number of people," said Francis. "Going back — it depends on how everything fits our schedule."

For more information on Cooperative for Education and its tours of Guatemala, go to www.coeduc.org or call 513-731-2595.