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Guatemala Literacy Project



Children of Hanapu school proudly wear baseball caps that Evanston Rotarians gave them when they participated in the Guatemala Literacy Project in January. Helen McQuiston, of Embroideri with Wings, donated 125 caps with Wyoming embroidered on them to hand out to the students in Guatemala.

Four Evanston Rotarians help students in Guatemala

By **BECKY CRUM**
Herald Reporter

Local Evanston Rotarians Sandra Lowe, Diane Datteri, Julia Murray and Toni Bradford participated in the Guatemala Literacy Project in January that provided impoverished schools with textbooks, computers, caps and sports balls.

Rotarian Toni Bradford said, in Guatemala, the government provides school up to the third grade. She said 70 percent of the kids do not go on past the third grade because the families can't afford for them to go.

She said if the children are needed at home to help support the family, they will be pulled out of school.

Bradford said the Guatemala Literacy Project bought the first set of textbooks and in five years, they will have enough set aside to buy new books for the next set of kids to go on with their education.

Bradford said the students they visited were ones that are going on in their education past the third grade. She said they walk miles every day to attend school.

"They walk up and down mountains to get to school. The schools we visited were in very rural,



Evanston Rotarian Sandra Lowe (far right) hands out hats donated by Helen McQuiston, of Embroideri with Wings, to locals in Guatemala during a recent trip to provide aid to impoverished schools.

COURTESY PHOTOS

mountainous villages with windy and bumpy dirt roads," Bradford said.

Bradford said it was beautiful there. She said the villagers had decorated the word "welcome" with dried foliage on a sign for them to read. She said the sides of the building had hydrangea blossoms stuck on the side of the building.

Rotary trip, A2

Rotary trip, from A1

"They threw down pine needles in our honor. In Guatemala it shows respect to put pine needles down so the feet of the people you are honoring don't touch the ground. Walking on the needles puts your feet above ground," Bradford said.

Bradford said the villagers farm a small piece of land on the side of the mountain. She said they make their gardens on any space that is available.

"They are trying to introduce terrace farming to them because when it rains, it washes away their crops. They have a rainy season and a dry season there and that's all," Bradford said.

Bradford said the majority of the families have a little plot of land that they share with their whole family. She said when the family grows up and has a family; it is not enough land to support them all so somebody will have to move on. She said in order to move to the city to get a job, it is necessary for them to at least learn to read and write. She said seven out of ten times, they will be required to at least know some basic computer skills.

"Even if they work in Guatemala at a fast food restaurant, they will need to at least be able to comprehend a computer," Bradford said.

Bradford said the education is based on a teacher writing stuff on a blackboard and the children copying it. She said they didn't have books to open and go over pages together as a group.

"The classrooms are in cinderblock buildings. Every school had bars on the windows. The students had a desk and a chair and nothing else. It was an old-fashioned desk that was just a little table and a chair hooked together. In the corner were a few books. When we passed out the textbooks, every child did a cer-

emony for us in their traditional culture," Bradford said.

Bradford said the group passed out a regular pencil and Bic pen to each student. She said they also took bubbles to interact with the children.

"We gave them postcards of Wyoming and stickers. They loved looking at the little brag books that we took with us with photos of our families and pets," Bradford said.

Bradford said one of the schools was on top of a plateau. She said they gave them some sports equipment, including two basketballs, two soccer balls, a football and a Frisbee. She said when she looked at the school she could imagine that if they kicked the soccer ball over the edge, they would never see it again.

Bradford said one of the schools had just gotten their computers. She said the children had been able to work on them for a few weeks and try them out.

"We sat down with the students and they showed us what they had learned. They pulled up a world map so we could show them where we lived. They used the map program to determine the mileage between Evanston and where they lived," Bradford said and smiled.

Bradford said there is a scholarship program for people to sponsor a child who wants to continue with their education past the third grade. She said in the program they can go on to complete fourth, fifth and sixth grades. She said the children in this program want to

achieve careers in teaching and other higher education fields.

"One girl in our group said she wanted to be a business manager, one wanted to be a teacher and another wanted to become a tour guide," Bradford said.

Bradford said in the education system, any child who makes it through the ninth grade usually comes back around and becomes a teacher in the rural villages.

"This is kind of scary because they have the same way of teaching as the way they were taught. It is basically writing down stuff on the blackboard and letting the children copy it. They don't know how to break that cycle, because they don't know any different," Bradford said.

Bradford said they set it up so the teachers come in and learn the computer first so they can take back what they have learned to teach the students. She said it is a sustainable follow up program because they don't hand them a computer and walk away. She said they stay until the teachers know how to use them.

"Some of the computers are hooked up to the Internet, but some are just learning basic Word and Excel. Everything they do has a fee involved so the schools are responsible for Internet expenses and every place they put a computer has to be locked and have a monitor system," Bradford said.

Bradford said the Guatemala Literacy Project is a Rotary project. She said they had five security guards with them at all times. She said she didn't see any rebels, but all the businesses in town who could afford it had

armed guards at the doors.

"We traveled with a security truck, then a van with part of us inside, another security truck, another van with the rest of us and then a security truck at the end. Every time we went out no matter where we went, if we turned around, we were guarded," Bradford said.

Bradford said the program is set up cautiously. She said they don't want any incidents that would ruin the program, so they hired the best security groups from Guatemala to prevent anything from happening. She said she felt perfectly safe even though they talked about high crime rates.

Bradford said the trip was extremely rewarding and the people they visited were very appreciative of the textbooks and computers.

"The kids were the best-mannered kids I've been around. They weren't noisy during presentations, they sat still and were thrilled with what we were doing," Bradford said.

Bradford said half the time the parents and grandparents sat up front and the children sat in the back of the room. She said the parents grasped what was happening, but the grandparents were the ones who were touched the most by the whole ordeal.

"They knew what this meant for the villages. They understood that this was going to be an opportunity for a better life. They were so thankful that we were there and they knew it would mean a chance for a better future. Many of them cried because they were so happy," Bradford said.