



Book Delivery Update

October 30, 1999

Dear Supporter,

I've recently returned from a trip to Guatemala and am sending you this brief update regarding COED's progress with the book project.

Jeff and I departed for Sacatepequez, one of our "expansion" regions for 2000, on Oct. 5. We had loaded the Jeep with provisions for a week of "promoting" our project to new schools. We had all the customary road snacks--dried bananas, mangos, and granola bars, along with two coolers of lunch meat, yogurt, and chopped vegetables. Jeff and I have both had more than our share of travelers diarrhea, so we were trying to minimize the amount of eating we would have to do in the small town "comedores." October is the height of the rainy season in Guatemala, so we were sure to throw in raincoats and umbrellas. As the poured down we joked to each other how it was exactly a year ago when we were trapped in Coban during Hurricane Mitch while on a similar "promoting" trip to Alta Verapaz. We hoped for better luck this time.

Sacatepequez is a department (or state) of Guatemala just east of Guatemala City. Geographically, it is comprised of fertile valleys, interspersed with steep mountain ridges and a chain of majestic, cone-shaped volcanoes, reminding us of past eruptions and earthquakes that have shaped the landscape and history of the region. The central volcano-ringed valley holds Antigua, the serene colonial town and past-capital of Guatemala, now a mecca for foreign tourists, adventurers, and students of Spanish. Antigua contains over 100 Spanish schools for foreigners, which provides the basis for the region's economy.

Compared to more remote areas of Guatemala (like Huehuetenango and Alta Verapaz), we found Sacatepequez to be about a notch higher economically. We encountered nearly all paved roads, solid concrete school buildings, and better-built homes. Despite this, we found that the schools were still in desperate need of learning materials. Like in the poorer areas of Guatemala, the people can still barely afford to send their kids to school; paying for textbooks, reading books and school supplies is still out of the question for most families. We estimate the literacy rate in the region to be less than 40% literate, but we were unable to find hard statistics. In short, we identified a pressing need in the area and looked forward to offering our programs at the schools.


Our goal was to meet with 18 schools in four to five days, which turned out to be pretty ambitious. Since the schools begin at various times of day, some in the morning, others in the afternoon or night (kids who work during the day are forced to go to school at night), Jeff and I found ourselves logging 12 hour days trying to cover them all. There are no telephones, so you just have to show up at the front door of the school and knock. Often we found that the principals were away so we had to return at another time. Since there was so much rain and mud and travel was difficult, we decided by the third day that once we arrived at a school we would present the project to whoever was there, whether it be the secretary or a group of teachers, or both. We left detailed materials with them to share with the principals.

Meeting with a typical school goes something like this: Jeff and I show up in a town in the Jeep and begin asking around. This is hard during the rainy season, as often people are not in the street to ask. In those cases we would run up to one of the many "tiendas" that line the streets. After asking multiple people (no one person ever seems to give you all the directions you need), we eventually end up at the school. The schools often look like walled concrete "compounds." All you can see from the outside is a big white wall, joining other big white walls in a continuous line. There are often no signs or markings and it can take a good deal of time to figure out just where the entrance is. Once found, we huddle under our umbrellas, grab our book samples and papers, and begin looking for someone who can tell us how to get to "La dirección" (the main office). Just about everyone looks at us, as it is uncommon to see gringos--especially two soggy ones--around these parts.

Usually the principal attends to us immediately (if he or she is there) and we present our programs. They listen intently and ask lots of questions. They often think that we are selling something at first and we have to convince them that this is a "development project" that we are giving them for their own benefit. They are not used to getting anything for free in this part of the world. The few rich people or the government give very little, and when they do, there are often strings attached. By the end of the meeting, we are usually being showered with things like: "Thank you so much for this help." "We have been asking for assistance like this for a long time, but no one has listened." "God bless your "patrocinadores" (patrons) for buying these books for us...they are very needed.", etc. etc. Indeed the majority of the comments are positive, however we do hear some constructive criticism at times. We were concerned during this trip about how many principals were saying that the nominal fees that the students have to pay to use the books (the part that makes the program self-sufficient) are too high at \$1.25 per book. We are presently evaluating this and may lower the fees in order to help ease the parent's burden. After the meeting, which usually takes 45min to 1 hour, we hand the principal and teachers some donated pencils, shake hands, and head back out into the rain.

After each day of school visits, we returned to Antigua, where we stayed the family of "Doña Greiz," a friendly Antigüeña whom we have known for some years. She spoke good, clear Spanish, and is a wonderful cook. She likes to talk while preparing food in the kitchen and we get to learn a lot about what is going on in the region. At times it was difficult, however, to come in after a long day and have to speak more Spanish and visit with the family members. Jeff and I were usually beat and wanted to just sit back, relax, and drink a cold beer. Spanish gets hard to speak as mental fatigue sets in at the end of the day. Our accommodations were made less comfortable by the fact that it was often hard to sleep due to the plethora of barking house dogs, running cats, and gawking birds of every sort that shared the small space with us...not to mention the electric clock that played a funky, electric guitar version of "ding dong dong ding, hear the chimes ring..." every hour of the night! Guatemalans have developed a tolerance for noise over the years that would astonish any North American. Earplugs are essential equipment for any trip. Nevertheless this was by far the cheapest way to spend the nights and we are committed to keeping our "admin" costs at an absolute minimum. Besides, it was nice to share breakfast with the family in the morning, pray with them, and be reminded once again of the average working families in Guatemala that our project aims to help.

The eighteen schools of Sacatepequez will be the latest to join our list to "candidate" schools that we hope to outfit with books this February-April, in partnership with Rotary International. We look forward to putting first-time-ever books into the hands of these needy schoolchildren.



Thanks for your continued support.

With warm regards,

Joe and Jeff Berninger

Will you help? According to our project teachers, textbooks improve the quality of a student's education by more than 70%. Your help can make a significant difference in the lives of Guatemalan children.

©1999-2006 All Rights Reserved. Cooperative for Education