



Out in the Field: Book Delivery Trip

March 14, 2000

Dear COED Supporters,

We're writing you from Guatemala City, after nearly two months of book deliveries. It has been a Herculean effort on the part of our whole team here. I'm sending you this update to give you a idea of what went into our deliveries this year and also to thank you sincerely for the help and support you've given to make this all possible.

At San Miguel Chicaj school, in the midst of our book dedication, a parent stepped up and approached the group. He wore a ruffled, blue polyester suit--probably his "Sunday suit." He had dark skin and deep lines in his forehead and cheeks. He was obviously someone who worked hard; who knew what it was to get his hands dirty--to sweat. He introduced himself, faced us and said:

"All I can say is thank you. Thank you for bringing these books for our children. Thank you for bringing the pens and pencils. Thank you for coming here in person, to begin this friendship with us, which we treasure greatly. I can promise you this: our children will USE these books. They will STUDY HARD. They will take care of the books because they are the seeds of a better future...."

This is typical of the outpouring of gratitude we've received at all the schools this year. The receptions we were given were unexpected, delightful and deeply touching. One or two times I looked around at our group of volunteers to see tears welling in many eyes. The experience of this year's deliveries has truly been tremendous. Our volunteers called it "life changing." For me it was the hardest, most stressful period of work in my life--but also the most rewarding. Jeff and I are both exhausted, physically and mentally. Our staff calls it "cansancio acumulado" an "accumulated weariness" that comes from working very hard for an extended period. We're all looking forward to a break.

It is impossible to encapsulate all the emotion, joys, challenges, and trials of this year's delivery season into one e-mail note. I'll do my best, though, to give you at least a flavor. First, let me share with you the statistics--the raw numbers of what you helped us accomplish. Then I'll move on to some "stories from the road."

Your support helped us purchase and deliver a grand total of 20,618 textbooks. These books will serve 4,813 new students this year and will found first-ever textbook programs in 19 new communities. In addition, you founded new school libraries at two rural primary schools. And remember that, because you are helping to found SELF-SUFFICIENT BOOK PROGRAMS, these schools will ALWAYS have books. If you come to Guatemala with your great-grandchildren, you will be able to visit these schools and see the descendents of the original books that YOU purchased way back in 1999. That's the neatest part of the program--you are NOT JUST BUYING BOOKS. As the parent said above, you are "planting seeds" that will serve literally thousands of children, year after year.



So, in addition to delivering more than 20,000 books to communities all over northern Guatemala, COED kicked off a new year at our 30 existing schools. The project now has 45,662 books in circulation and has served 18,699 schoolchildren. When you consider the fact that books improve a student's learning by more than 70%, you can see the real impact--a revolutionary impact--you are making in these communities. Again, thank you for all that YOU'VE done to support our work and make this possible. The children thank you; the teachers thank you; the parents thank you.

From Nancy Paola Grande Tala, a student at INSOL school in Antigua:
"Dear Patrons, I hope you find yourselves well and in good health. The motive of this present letter is to thank you for the books that you have sent us. We know that we have to take care of these books. And as you have done this good for us, in the same way, we will do good for others. Thank you for your sincere attention. I say goodbye, very gratefully and I hope that all goes well as you continue this project. Sincerely, Nancy Paola Grande Tala, INSOL Antigua."

From Cindy Gabriela Rodriquez at INSOL school.
"Dear Patrons, I hope that you are all very well. this letter is to thank you for the opportunity that you have given us to study with books. And also to have them in the school for students to use after us. My name is Cindy Gabriela Rodriquez Muñoz and I am studying in National School for Señoritas, Olimpia Leal in Antigua Guatemala. I live here and have three older sisters. Two of them have already graduated from this school and are currently working. They told me that this help you are giving is very good. They only wish that they would have had the same opportunity. My parents said the same thing. I thank you very much. Sincerely, Cindy

From a student at INEBE school near Antigua:
"The National School for Basic Education thanks you for the valiant help that you are giving to our school. In the name of all the students, the teachers, and our parents--the "family" that forms our school, we thank you. INEBE, Antigua Guatemala, 2/2/2000."

You've received personal thank you letters (like the above) from over 4,000 students this year! We'll try to get some of these circulated so that you can see them first-hand.

O.K., back to talking about the book deliveries. We began in late January and just finished this past week. The books were delivered in three waves: first to the "state" of Sacatepequez (Antigua area), the second to Baja Verapaz, the third to Sac., Baja, and Alta Verapaz along with a group of 14 volunteers from Rotary International. With over 20,000 books to deliver and many schools very far away from Guatemala City, we first rented a large truck and established regional book warehouses. We set up these warehouses anyplace we could reliably store books. In Antigua it was with the Minnesota-based Common Hope. In Baja Verapaz, an extra bedroom in the house of a friend named Don Chepe. In Alta Verapaz, the Benedictine Monastery. From these distribution points, we delivered to individual communities using our four-wheel drive trucks.

Since there are often no phones and no reliable mail system, we have to do a training and preparation visit at each school. We then show up several weeks later with the actual books. While we are in these rural areas, we also meet with schools that chose NOT to enter the program. The purpose is to understand their unique challenges and to improve our processes. You often log 15 hour work days, meet with schools until you're blue in the face, and endure lots of jeep rides. At night, you're often in a musty, dirty, cell-like room with sunken beds, bare light bulbs, and cold showers.

When we arrive at the schools, the process goes something like this: 1. We begin by doing a complete book count. This can take an hour or more at a big school, but is necessary because the publishers sometimes pack incorrectly. 2. Next, one of us, usually Horacio, trains the principal and secretary in our method of managing and accounting for the books. We have a complete, proven system, based on tips and techniques learned from our best schools. This also takes about an hour and a half. 3. At the same time, usually Jeff and I give talks to the students in their classrooms. Since ultimately THEY are the ones who will be using the books, we consider it very important to educate them as to how the project works, why it works that way, and what THEY can do to collaborate. This talk is interactive and fun and is the result of three years of experimentation and improvement. We've found that when EVERYONE at the school--parents, teachers, principals, and students--understand and appreciate the program, everything functions well and requires less follow-up.

We have a slightly different process when volunteers come to help (like the 14 Rotarians). In this case, instead of doing presentations in the individual classrooms, we do a big "kick off" with the whole school present. We give speeches, talk to the students, present a dedication plaque and hand out donated pens, pencils, and erasers. The school usually prepares plays and "folkloric acts" to commemorate the program. Jeff and I would like to begin more of our school programs like this (i.e., with lots of volunteer help and a big kickoff). We need more volunteers! Those coming for the wedding week will get a taste of this when we do our book inauguration at Aguas Calientes on Friday, 4/7.

As I mentioned above, 14 Rotary volunteers came down for a week of book deliveries. These individuals represented the 42 Rotary clubs from around the U.S. and Canada who supported the book project this year. They were all hearty folks, ranging from 14 to about 70 years old. We rented a big bus and ran all over Guatemala, founding book programs in 10 different communities. The schedule was rigorous--we delivered two to three schools per day and worked from dawn till dusk. Some days didn't end until 9 or 10pm. We were impressed and frankly, touched by the hard work and commitment exhibited by these Rotarians: John Townsend from Moses Lake Washington, 69 years old, delivered books one-handed while walking with a cane. Jeff Taylor, from Raleigh, had had polio as a child, leaving him with limited use of one leg. He pushed himself day after day to navigate uneven ground, climb steps, and dodge rocks--sometimes exhausting himself--so that he could do his part in serving these children. Rachel and Lorin Townsend, ages 14 and 16, from Moses Lake Washington, missed a week of school and a big school dance to be here. Scott Miller, from Piqua, Ohio, acquired a passport and made Guatemala his first-ever trip outside the United States. All 14 volunteers came to Guatemala at their own expense and made a great contribution to our work. Jeff and I felt honored and humbled to have them here.

Some parting quotations:

Jeff Taylor, Raleigh, NC:

"I needed this trip. I needed to see and be reminded of the misery in the world. I think this trip has made me a better person and a better Rotarian. What we did was a drop, but enough drops can make a difference."

Ed Cody, Raleigh, NC:

"It was a trip everyone in our country should take, regardless of economic status, for it would elevate even the lowest of the low to see the obvious happiness that can be had, in spite of having virtually nothing but the shirt on one's back. I've returned with a much fuller appreciation..."



Deliveries 2000 was a team effort, made possible by the work and contributions many people like you. Thank you again for what you've done for us. Thank you for what you've done for the children of Guatemala. Remember that we've covered just 44 of the 600 secondary schools in this country. Our work is just beginning. We've already set a goal of offering the hope and promise of first-ever textbooks to 20 new communities in 2001. We need your help. Please continue to spread the word about our work. Thank you and may God bless you.

With warm regards,

Joe and Jeff Berninger
Guatemala City
3/14/00

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.

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