



Our Year in Review

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Reading for guests at
the Centro Educativo
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Bringing Literacy to the Villages

Eight years ago *From Books to Brilliance (FBTB)* was an idea. Today we are delighted to report that our Central American libraries continue to grow, offering hundreds of children in six remote villages an ever-growing selection of books to read. Here in New Mexico, our organization supports family and childhood literacy by providing books to *Cuidando los Niños*, a day shelter for homeless children. Thank you for your continuous support. Your enthusiasm and encouragement is appreciated by us all.

Public awareness of our mission continues to grow. For the fifth year *FBTB* partnered with Mercedes Fruland of *Usborne Books & More* by selling books at the *Corrales Harvest Festival*; we presented our work at a world language conference at the *University of New*



More books for elementary students in Santo
Tomás la Unión, Guatemala

Mexico; and *Rotary eClub of the Southwest, USA* featured *FBTB* in their August meeting. In July John Wintersteen, a *Rotary eClub* member, his son-in-law, Bob Culley, and friend, Tom Coulter, volunteered their time and engineering skills in Guatemala to renovate an unused

building soon to be *Aj Awinel's* middle school library.

FBTB partners with the "*Amigos Program*" at the *Austrian Guatemalan Institute (IAG)*, a private school in Guatemala City. *IAG* continues to support the Mayan schools that it founded decades ago, which are now also the sites of

Support *From Books to Brilliance* at:
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Your online searches and purchases will raise money for
village libraries at no cost to you!

Bringing literacy to the villages

FBTB's libraries. Last summer our organization donated hundreds of books to their small collections in the villages of El Estor, Santo Tomás la Unión, and Rabinal. The community celebrated the renovation of *Aj Awinel's* school library with sacred dances, heart-felt speeches, a delicious fish dinner, photos and autographs. We appreciated their invitation to celebrate as well as to serve their community.

After a six hour drive from the capital city to El Estor, *Aj Awinel's* students and board members welcomed us with a short introductory meeting under their thatched roof. Juan Francisco Yat Quinich, their project coordinator, had prepared a schedule for the next three days. After examining the building, everyone agreed that the cracked cement floor needed



Removing the old cement floor for *Aj Awinel's* new library

to be removed and a new one poured, making it less vulnerable to tropical insects and potential damage to books; the door and one window would be enlarged, letting in more light and air; the corrugated metal roof leaked and would be replaced.

Though it was already late afternoon work began immediately. A dozen teen-age boys took turns swinging pick axes and hauling out cement in a wheel barrel. Pieces of cement flew everywhere, and in a few hours much of old floor was gone! Students began this

challenging work again early the next morning, but this time wearing the gloves and goggles provided by John. When the boys took a break, the girls began. Amidst laughter and contests of strength and endurance, the students enlarged windows and a door, shoveled sand, hauled water, mixed bags of cement, and participated in pouring the new floor. Meanwhile, *Amigos* volunteers Karin Sibora and daughter Linda, with the help of the *Aj Awinel* girls, organized and inventoried hundreds of books for their future home. In spite of three days of work in tropical heat and humidity, the students never stopped smiling, much was accomplished...and then, in traditional dress, they danced!

Before *FBTB* volunteers became involved in this reconstruction, many people and organizations had already raised the \$7000

Aj Awinel's renovated space...finished and ready for books!



We appreciate your support!

- *Art Schreiber, Blind Art Radio Show
- *Barnes & Noble
- *California Pizza Kitchen
- *Casa Xalteva
- *Chippewa Falls Senior High School
- *Chippewa Herald Newspaper
- *Corrales Harvest Festival
- *Cooperativa de la Mujer
- *Cooperativa María Luisa Ortiz
- *Cottonwood Classical Preparatory
- *Dr. Seuss Foundation
- *Goodwill Industries
- *Hoopoe Books
- *Instituto Austriaco Guatemalteco
- *James Monroe Middle School students
- *Kim Jew Photography
- *LAS, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire
- *Mercedes Fruland, Usborne Books
- *Moss Optical
- *Rotary eClub of the Southwest, USA
- *SOLAS, University of New Mexico
- *St. Anthony's Alliance
- *University of Texas-Galveston Medical Branch
- *WELCA, All Saints Lutheran Church

Bringing literacy to the villages

needed for construction materials. *Aj Awinel's* middle school students served chicken dinners in El Estor...chickens they had raised themselves. "Amigos" volunteers held a variety of fundraisers, including selling Mayan textiles and folk-art in Europe. Additionally, *Aj Awinel* received a bequest...a gift from an Austrian woman who had visited the bilingual school several years before. It seems fitting that "aj awinel" means "the sower" in Q'eqchi, the area's Mayan language. Speakers of Q'eqchi, German, Spanish and English worked in partnership to sow this vital seed...one that will grow into a library that offers knowledge and a path to wisdom for *Aj Awinel's* eager students.

In the village of Santo Tomás la Unión excited students read to us from *FBTB's* previously



Mayan students in Santo Tomás la Unión writing about their favorite book



Petition for a water system for a mountain village near El Estor, Guatemala

donated books, to show their expanded reading abilities. Again, children sang and danced, breaking a piñata and presenting its visitors with gifts of hand-woven textiles.

Julio Ismalej Raxcacó, a school board member in Rabinal, calls this summer's books "superbuenos"! Such expressions of appreciation show an excitement for literacy and a readiness to take their place in a larger world.

Over the last seven years I've been asked if the people in these communities really want education. If one listens to their voices the answer is a definite yes. Evidence of unnecessary

human suffering is present in their stories. Without literacy skills, how does a parent remember which child gets which medicine and the dosage? How does a citizen run for office and petition his government for a clean water system? Dr. Janice Smith, a leader of the UT-Galveston medical delegations to Mulukukú, has stated "*poverty and illiteracy have a direct impact on both the mental and physical health of children, as well as on their ability to rise up out of poverty...lack of education is the single most important determinant of health, particularly in terms of maternal and child health in developing countries.*" Our team believes that there is tremendous power in written language. We all can use that power to improve the human condition.

FBTB will continue to focus its efforts on remote villages in Central America, where the need for literacy cannot be fully measured. Access to books and information is almost non-existent. The concept for *From Books to Brilliance* was conceived in Mulukukú, one such Nicaraguan village, where our founders volunteered for the University of Texas-Galveston medical team. We quickly recognized the basic need for literacy while witnessing first hand the suffering of the local population. Creating access to books and information in rural

Bringing literacy to the villages

populations became our founding principle... the central tenet of *From Books to Brilliance* remains unchanged.

Nicaragua is the poorest of all Spanish-speaking countries, and Guatemala suffers the lowest literacy rate in Latin America. Roughly half of Guatemala's citizens speak indigenous languages, in which few books are published, and even fewer are made available. Though the Guatemalan government mandates a minimum of six years of education, most Mayan children stop attending school



Congratulations to Dr. Emily Cross, one of our founders, who recently earned her Ph.D. in Educational Studies at the University of Nebraska

well before sixth grade, and many never enroll. Village schools in both countries lack experienced teachers, educational supplies, and adequate classrooms, as well as

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www.frombookstobrilliance.org**

Printing costs for our newsletter are donated yearly.



In memory of 4th grader Juan Carlos Vásquez Chocoy (in blue), who was swept away in the Guatemalan rains. He liked to sing, play soccer, and participate in school activities.

potable water and basic sanitation.

Last summer I was introduced to Pedro Jaramillo Rivas, a catholic priest from Spain, who ministers to the poor in Guatemala City. The importance of promoting rural literacy once again became clear. With limited opportunities in remote villages and with hopes of making a better life for their families, citizens from the countryside, both in Guatemala and Nicaragua, are drawn to their capital cities. Most arrive without the skills necessary to be successful in an urban environment. They live in structures built with substandard materials, typically corrugated metal, cardboard and sheets of plastic. Guatemala City's homeless reside

on the treacherous cliffs of deep ravines. When the seasonal rains come, these patched-together shelters tumble down, one on top of another, into the canyon. Father Jaramillo introduced me to several of these unfortunate inhabitants while navigating the steep canyon paths.

From Books to Brilliance brings information and opportunity to the villages, creating an environment in which children are able to learn and flourish in their own community, where most were born and now reside. In spite of many hardships these remarkable Central Americans continue to persevere. Hard-working and self-reliant, they are people of great dignity. Imagine combining their strength of character and resourcefulness with the power of literacy! We hope the children of these villages will continue to learn and grow, contribute to their communities, and become agents of change, improving their own lives as well as those around them. In the words of elementary students in Santo Tomás la Unión, "Thanks, *From Books to Brilliance*, for helping our education and our reading... we will become the greatest heroes of our nation!"

