

Our Year in Review

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Books Inspire Creativity

Samuel Vidaurre lost his life on the road to Mulukukú during the 1980s Nicaraguan Revolution. Though unknown to the enemy, Mulukuku's young teacher and librarian was dangerous. Literacy is power, and with no calluses on his hands, that was his crime. Closed since Samuel's death, From Books to Brilliance (FBTB) reopened the Samuel Vidaurre library in 2007. Today we expect that Samuel would be smiling. In both Nicaragua and Guatemala, access to books and literacy is increasing. This summer's ninth trip to Central America was one surprise after another. Our small libraries are expanding, both in number of books and in number of libraries. Thank you for your enthusiasm and continued support of this literacy project.

FBTB's mission to create access to books in impoverished communities is simple



Thank you, Delta Kappa Gamma Educational Foundation, for these textbooks!
Centro Educativo Austríaco Maxeño

and straight forward. With the funds that are generously donated and earned throughout the year, our team purchases books in the capital cities of Guatemala and Nicaragua, and transports them to each village. Thus, our libraries grow with resources tailored to needs. However, our annual trips to visit and

strengthen these projects can be logistically challenging. Complications arise when working with remote villages that lack modern systems of communication and are located at the end of primitive roads. Few offer accommodations for travelers; safe food and water is always a concern. Furthermore, our time in each village



Happy holding a new book in Santo Tomás la Unión, Guatemala

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is limited. We depend on the leaders of these communities and on our partners to ensure that the projects function well. That said, we are hopeful, but anxious, each year when we return.

We were concerned about the library in El Pantanal, Nicaragua, a desperately poor village where many live in or around a city dump. Our previous visit revealed serious problems. Two years prior, with help from the community, FBTB volunteers Brianna Seidlitz and Maggie Covill painted its interior walls and supplied it with bookshelves and child-sized tables and chairs. The town planned to take measures to install electricity. At that time, according to the library's director, the books were getting "well read," and children came from nearby schools to study. However, during our next trip we found the library still without adequate lighting. Even worse, a new principal at the school limited access to the room, afraid that this collection of treasured books would disappear. The teachers were disheartened; the excitement was gone.

When our team arrived again last July, what we discovered beat all of our expectations. Located in a new building at *José de la Mena*

FBTB thanks Rita Wirkala and Alicia Fletcher for their excellent work in translating our newsletters into Spanish. Now our Central American friends can read them as well.



The third home for El Pantanal's library, built by Rotarians from North Carolina and Nicaragua

elementary school, our small collection of four hundred books had a new home. Children sat at tables reading books. Now open daily, the library enjoys electrical lighting, bookshelves, and enough chairs and tables to accommodate a class of twenty enthusiastic students. Freshly painted on the outside wall was Rotary International's logo. The excitement is back; the surprise was stunning. Sometimes things just work out!

Several miles away is the *Biblioteca Paraíso del Niño* in El Fortín. Prior to its creation in 2009, this village had no children's books. This *Children's Paradise Library*, now with over 600 books, serves as a youth center for creativity and inspiration. It has become a "second home" for many children who go there regularly to study, read stories, put puzzles together, and

share this experience with other like-minded children. The library is working "perfectly," claims Indira Morales, our partner at *Casa de la Mujer*, a women's cooperative in nearby Granada.

FBTB's challenge in El Fortín is access to the village. Due to primitive roads, El Fortín has been physically isolated, especially during the rainy season. The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire helped build a bridge to ameliorate that problem, but taxi drivers continue to refuse to navigate the few miles of mud and rock that damage their cars. When Maggie and Brianna painted this library, they rented bikes in Granada and traversed those potholed roads to the village, returning to the city for supplies. With no brakes, the two women walked the bikes in city

In El Fortín's library with books written and illustrated by students in Daniel Gannon's Spanish class, Brentwood School, California



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traffic, adding to safety issues and slowing their progress. Working into the evening, they gratefully accepted an invitation to sleep in a local woman's house. A dark and dangerous ride back to their hostel in Granada was out of the question. Our partners at the women's cooperative drive us there and back, but schedules are tight and there is never enough time to spend at the library.

Obstacles of this sort do not deter FBTB from supporting our libraries. In June both our organization and the *Biblioteca Paraíso del Niño* received a wonderful gift. Elisa Wirkala, the daughter of Dr. Rita Wirkala, an ardent supporter of FBTB, was traveling through Nicaragua on her motorcycle. Elisa's 20,000 mile transcontinental journey began at the southernmost tip of South



Elisa Wirkala, on her 20,000 mile motorcycle, stopping to buy books for *Biblioteca Paraíso del Niño*



Created "in the style of From Books to Brilliance," Indira's children donated their own books

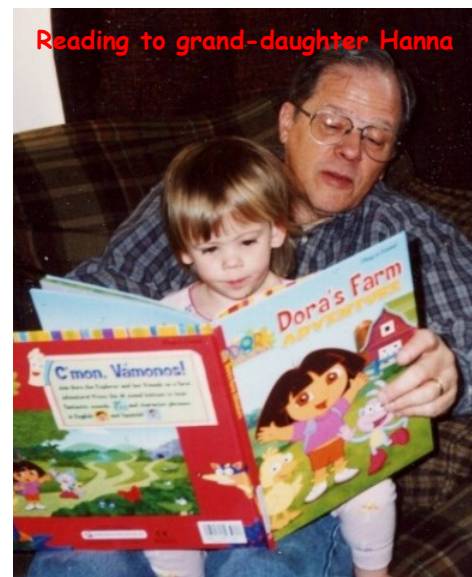
America and would end at her home in Seattle. Her goal while in Granada was to meet Indira, purchase loads of books for *Children's Paradise*, and deliver them. And she did! Through support from our growing international network, this library continues to expand and plays an increasing role in children's lives in El Fortín.

There's much more. Indira escorted us to a new village library in the nearby town of La Solidaridad, created, she said, "in the style of From Books to Brilliance." As a building project manager, Indira's team replaces hundreds of metal and cardboard shacks with cement-block or adobe houses, complete with flooring, running water and sewage systems. *Biblioteca La Solidaridad* is on the second floor of one of their buildings. Indira's children donated their own collection of one hundred books. When we asked how this came about, Indira said that she was so moved by the impact of the El Fortín library project, that she is now committed to creating a library where ever her team works. We look forward to helping our Nicaraguan partners grow this library, where children are already engaged with the

small offering at *Biblioteca La Solidaridad*.

FBTB's three projects in Guatemala continue to challenge us. These are libraries located in outlying Mayan villages, in schools founded decades ago by the

Instituto Austriaco Guatemalteco (IAG) in Guatemala City. Partnering with IAG's volunteer *Amigos* program, FBTB is in an enviable position. We benefit from the relationships with the Mayan villages that its volunteers established many years ago. This international group, made up of



Reading to grand-daughter Hanna

"Books stacked knee-high near his bedside table and next to his reading chair were consistent monuments in my home. My dad, Lanny Shaeffer, LOVED to read. I thought FBTB was a fitting organization to support to honor, and after he died, to remember my dad."

Allyson Neighbors

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Austrian, German and Guatemalan teachers, promote bilingual and bicultural education in each school. Their expertise and knowledge of each unique village is critical, and they facilitate our annual visits to each library.

The *Centro Educativo Austríaco Maxeño* elementary school in Santo Tomás La Unión is located at the end of a long, rocky road. Yet each year it is worth the trip. Its faculty and students welcome us with school-wide programs, hand-made gifts, music and delicious tamales. In the past few years FBTB has donated almost three hundred books in Spanish and K'iche', their home language. Last summer we acquired textbooks from *Piedra Santa*, a publisher in Guatemala City. Most Mayan schools in Guatemala have none. Now fourth through sixth graders have class sets of language arts and math books...Guatemalan approved texts that are culturally relevant to these indigenous students.

Jun Toj elementary is located in the mountain village of Rabinal. In 2012 FBTB donated children's

"The only way to eradicate diseases, ignorance, poverty, delinquency and bad governments is educating people and that can only be done with books."

Víctor Esperón Alva, member of Rotary eClub of the SW USA



Aj Awinel's renovated library, named after a beloved teacher

books, both in Spanish and Achi, this area's native language. Each classroom organized reading corners where students enjoyed the books. The school surprised us this



Mayan students reading in their library at Jun Toj, Rabinal, Guatemala

year with an organized library, furnished with tables, chairs and bookshelves. Moreover, Julio Ismalej Raxcacó, president of the local school board, joined us in Guatemala City to purchase books that teachers requested.

Two summers ago Rotarian John Wintersteen, and engineers Bob Culley and Tom Coulter, traveled with us to *Aj Awinel* in El Estor to begin the renovation of a small building that would serve as the middle school's library. Students did most of the labor, replacing the cracked cement floor and

enlarging a door and windows. In July *Biblioteca Prof. Edgar Oliverio Coc Quinich* had a new ceiling and roof. Named after a beloved teacher, this library now serves the community's children. Though culturally hesitant to ask, *Aj Awinel's* teachers requested class sets of language arts textbooks.

FBTB continues to find new supporters. Recently two Rotary clubs promised to provide matching grants for *Aj Awinel's* book request. A generous \$1500 grant from the Delta Kappa Gamma Educational Foundation enabled FBTB to supply the textbooks to the Mayan school in Santo Tomás la Unión. Students in advanced Spanish classes at Brentwood School in Los Angeles wrote and illustrated dozens of beautiful children's books for the village libraries. In Albuquerque Kim Jew Photography partners with us to raise funds.

You all generously provide the resources. It is the hard work of our partners in Central America and the persistence of the citizens in these villages that move these projects forward. Thank you for all you do to assist us in this expanding mission to help others as we are able.

