



Our Year in Review

March 2016
Volume 8

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Looking at the past...planning for the future

Ten years ago in rural Nicaragua the three founders of From Books to Brilliance (FBTB) beheld a world of devastating poverty and illiteracy through the eyes of volunteers for a University of Texas medical team. A feeling of powerlessness overwhelmed each of us, as we translated for doctors, took vital signs, and instructed non-readers on how to administer a myriad of medications. Hundreds of people, that had walked or traveled “by beast” for days, lined up to see a doctor. Families arrived dehydrated and exhausted in Nicaragua’s tropical heat. Coming from far-flung villages, many had never seen a doctor. Would they remember which medication was prescribed for which child, and be able to distinguish the antibiotic from the pain medication? We feared the worst.

Though debilitating poverty still exists a decade later, our views now steer toward optimism. We thank you



Lined up to see a doctor

for this opportunity to promote children’s literacy in Central America, as well as in New Mexico. Andrew Carnegie declared that “A library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people. It is a never failing spring in the desert.” Shifting from a culture of non-readers to a culture of readers takes time. Nevertheless, every summer we witness definite signs of that “spring in the desert.” Our libraries are

expanding...more libraries, more books and more readers. Citizens anticipate our annual visits, and share stories of the children who frequent these humble libraries to read, study and recreate. We are both thrilled and surprised by these small successes in our mission to promote literacy in these communities.

From Books to Brilliance does not work alone. We build upon foundations that were conceived and constructed years before we arrive, and partner with organizations that first tend to the people’s greatest physical needs. They provide medical care, clean water, housing and schools. We believe that literacy is the next step in strengthening these villages. A local library triggers change. With the acquisition of literacy skills, citizens



A decade ago,
Maggie Covill, volunteer
for the University of
Texas-Galveston medical
team

“If we never educate our people, all we’re doing is passing out pills.”

**Nicaraguan liaison for University of
Texas medical team**

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can better care for their families and communities. At that pivotal point lives improve, and a more promising future becomes possible.

A decade ago, the Nicaraguan village of El Fortín owned a few dozen books, all arranged on a dusty shelf in their community center. None were for children. Today the colorful rainbow sign, clearly painted by its young patrons, boasts the existence of the *Biblioteca Paraíso del Niño*, a place referred to by some as their “second home.”

Teresa, our first librarian at

**Removing shoes before entering
AMNLAE's community building and
Children's Paradise Library**



“A library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people. It is a never failing spring in the desert.”

Andrew Carnegie



This summer's books for Biblioteca Paraíso del Niño, El Fortín, Nicaragua

Children's Paradise, and her teenage helpers are no longer here. Smiling, an older woman welcomes us. She explains that Teresa is at home raising her first child, and the three girls are now students at the *Universidad Centroamericana* in Managua. “My grandchildren will be in school soon and I need to be ready,” Rosalía explains, who loves managing the library. Our visit is interrupted by a fifth grader rushing in to return an armful of books. “Gracias, Rosalía,” she shouts as she runs out the door, late for lunch. The books look old and worn, clearly well-read, but still fitting to entertain the next young readers at Children's Paradise Library.

Women's cooperatives are FBTB's primary partners in Nicaragua. In the 1990s, after more than a decade of civil war, mothers found themselves alone to raise their children. Women looked to each other for ongoing support. They formed cooperatives and orchestrated a movement, a way to

survive. These co-ops fought to bring health and education to their villages, and partnered with numerous organizations along the way to accomplish those goals. That fight continues today, and FBTB finds itself part of that effort.

The *Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinoza (AMNLAE)* is our partner in some of Nicaragua's poorest villages. To date this co-op has replaced almost a thousand *casas de cartón* with modest adobe houses, complete with flooring, running water, sewage systems, and another very important amenity...a door that locks.

Project manager Indira Morales described the life of millions of “Marías” living in these “cardboard houses.” For María's family the local dump is a food source. Every morning her children spend hours fetching water and searching for wood, leaving little time to attend school. Without a door that locks, María must be home at all times. Left unattended, the metal sheeting that keeps her family dry from the rain becomes part of her neighbor's roof, and her wood cooks their dinner. María becomes trapped, protecting a shack built



Adobe house with a door that locks

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on a small piece of dirt. She cannot learn a trade or seek employment. Maria is fearful and isolated.

AMNLAE's houses offer security and freedom. Thousands of people living in the villages of El Fortín, El Pantanal and Solidaridad are now able to leave their houses, find a job, and send their children to school. Indira ardently promotes FBTB's libraries in each of these communities, and recently established a library herself "in the style of From Books to Brilliance" in



Books for Biblioteca From Books to Brilliance, José de la Cruz Mena, El Pantanal, Nicaragua

Solidaridad. She believes that the goals of AMNLAE and FBTB blend together beautifully. Thanks to AMNLAE, families now have the opportunity to educate themselves, while From Books to Brilliance creates the libraries.

School attendance is rising in all three of these villages. Rotarians are busy constructing buildings to accommodate growth. In El Pantanal our library occupies a beautiful new classroom, where a

We are very fortunate to have the expert advise of Suzanne Atkinson for our financial reporting. Thank you, Suzannel

newly formed reading club meets. New shelving displays the books that FBTB has donated since 2010. Better yet are numerous books that FBTB did not donate, with the logos of *World Vision* and *Puedo Leer* stamped on the inside covers. Life is changing for many of Nicaragua's poorest people.

Guatemala's literacy rate is the lowest in the Spanish-speaking world. The Maya make up fifty percent of the country's population and speak over two dozen languages. On average, today's indigenous adult attended school for only two and a half years. Educational resources are scarce. Children learn to read from a blackboard, but without books they cannot read to learn.

Twenty years ago, with the goal of strengthening the Maya people and culture, the Austrian Guatemalan Institute (IAG) established bilingual, bicultural schools in the villages of Santo Tomás la Unión, Rabinal and El Estor. The teachers are Maya, who instruct in Spanish and in their native language. Building on the relationships initiated two decades ago by the Austrians, FBTB purchases literature and textbooks in Guatemala City and delivers them to these schools.

The last eight-mile stretch into Santo Tomás la Unión is rough, traveling on a road of mud and rock. However, what the village



Learning gardening skills at Centro Educativo Austriaco Maxeño, Santo Tomás la Unión, Guatemala

lacks in comfort, *Centro Educativo Austriaco Maxeño (CEAM)* elementary school makes up for in hospitality. In July, FBTB volunteers arrived at this school to find water boiling on their wood-fired stove, in preparation for a feast of corn-on-the-cob. Students led me to their garden, proudly pointing out a variety of vegetables. Gardening is part of CEAM's curriculum. Thanks to grants from Delta Kappa Gamma Educational Foundation, teachers now instruct with Guatemalan-published math and language arts books, enough for each student in first through sixth grades. And last summer, with a



Studying from texts provided by Delta Kappa Gamma Educational Foundation

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third grant from Rotary eClub of the Southwest, USA, middle school students at *Aj Awinel* in El Estor enjoy their language arts texts.

A battle rages in these three villages. This battle is not one of blood, reminiscent of the Guatemala's dreadful civil war that ended decades ago, but one for self-reliance and self-determination, a battle for the future of the Maya. IAG's schools are searching for ways to exist independently. CEAM sells produce planted and harvested by its students; Aj Awinel leases its classrooms and library weekly to the *Universidad Rural de Guatemala*. With education and books, these villages are beginning

Luke Baca, our youngest volunteer, reading to CLN Kids from books donated by FBTB



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to change.

Albuquerque's *Cuidando Los Niños (CLN)* cares for young children of homeless families. In December, board member Debbie Gonzales and son Luke, delivered our latest donation to their pre-school program...books specifically requested by CLN. By securing resources through local book drives and fund-raising events, FBTB will soon expand our services to New Mexico's indigenous Pueblo population as well.

Every summer our suitcases weigh more. In July we carried dozens of original children's books to our young Central American readers...books created especially for them. Teens studying Spanish at Brentwood School in California, and at Sandia Prep and Moreno Valley High School in New Mexico, wrote and illustrated children's stories. The resulting photos of kids in Nicaragua and Guatemala reading the books they themselves created charmed our young authors. This cultural exchange between students in the United States and in Central America continues to grow. We expect our suitcases to bulge with books again this summer, and we are delighted!



Bags full of language arts books for Aj Awinel's middle school students. Thank you, Rotary eClub of the Southwest, USA

From Books to Brilliance is able to continue this effort because of you, our supporters. One hundred percent of your gifts are applied directly to our mission. We feel fortunate to serve, and welcome this unexpected, but beautiful responsibility. A decade ago, José, a medical interpreter from Honduras, said to me, "Kim, these are some of the poorest people in the world. We need to treat them like kings and queens." Thank you for helping us do just that!



Gifts for our Nicaraguan readers: Original story books created by students at Brentwood School, Sandia Prep and Moreno Valley HS