



Girl Readers Project

Libraries are fundamental in a democratic society. Citizens young and old can access resources to help make informed decisions, foster critical thinking and encourage self-education. In Guatemala, the Riecken Foundation's network of community libraries provides comprehensive programming aimed at motivating children and youth to become lifelong readers, providing them with a foundation to develop imagination, creativity, and curiosity. Armed with these properties, they will be better prepared to be contributing members of society. This project focuses attention on motivating and empowering girls.

Origins of the Riecken Foundation

Illustrator Susan Riecken and social entrepreneur Allen Andersson founded the Riecken Foundation in 2000, establishing its first community library in Guatemala in 2001. In March of 2009 the Riecken Foundation Guatemala inaugurated its tenth and eleventh libraries. The Foundation's mission is to promote democracy and prosperity in Central America through community libraries that spark a spirit of discovery and foster citizen participation. The vision is that free and open access to information, combined with the sparking of a spirit of discovery through reading in children and youth is the harnessing formula to promote critical thinking, literacy, and growth of and participation in civil society. Currently there are 64 community libraries forming a network between Guatemala and Honduras.

Of the 180,000 registered visits in 2008 to Guatemala's network of nine community libraries, approximately 85% of the users were children and youth. With a focus on motivating children to engage with books from infancy, the Riecken Foundation has developed a model that aims to invest in children through an emphasis on reading at an early age, while providing a framework through the library's structure and programming that allows individuals to apply the creativity and innovation they gain from reading as they mature.

Content

The Riecken Foundation establishes every new community library with a collection of 1,000 books. All titles are new and carefully selected by a committee of specialists to meet the needs and interests of the community in its context, such as ensuring the inclusion children's books in Mayan languages. Where appropriate, Guatemalan and Central American authors and themes are included, but the collection represents timeless classics

that cross cultural boundaries as well. Approximately 40% of the establishing collection is children literature (the collections are added to every year). The remaining 60% contains fiction and nonfiction, reference materials, learning materials, and more. Games and other materials that stimulate developmental processes for children are also added to the collection.

The librarians and library directors, who hail from the community, are trained in a simplified version of the Dewey Decimal System, and in turn, transfer research skills to the library's users. The literature selected is carefully scrutinized to coincide with the pursuit of the Foundation's mission. The Foundation does not provide school textbooks for the libraries, although the communities have the autonomy to add them to their collections if they wish. The Foundation also does not seek donations of used books unless they are in excellent condition and in accordance with the Foundation's mission in sparking a spirit of discovery.

Objectives

While the Foundation's work addresses broad goals, it focuses on reading for children as a fundamental core instrument to achieving many of its objectives over time. The unique learning programs implemented in each community library, combined with the high level of training provided and local participation in their management are what distinguish this network of libraries from traditional public libraries in Guatemala. This ensures that children and youth are in an environment that stimulates wonder and imagination through reading that will translate into aspiration and innovation as they develop. The Foundation's efforts can be mapped out through four broadly defined, integrated developmental areas with complimentary objectives:

1. Innovation and a Spirit of Discovery

- Creation of a fundamental base of common literature
- Increased reading, exploration, and exposure to ideas and opportunities
- Greater diversity of goals and aspirations for the future among library users

2. Leadership and Capacity Building

- Riecken libraries as models of transparency and effective leadership
- Increased capacity to access, analyze, and utilize information

3. Access to Information and Technologies

- Technology as a catalyst for community and business development through increased integration with the global economy
- Increased social inclusion through communication, networking, and lessening the digital divide

4. Citizen Participation

- Riecken libraries functioning as vehicles for increased democracy, prosperity, and increased children's rights
- Strengthening the culture of volunteerism and social participation

Target groups and justification

Community libraries' resources, programming and services are intended to be accessed by all members of the community; however there is a heavy programming emphasis on developing skills and motivation for reading in children and young people, and more than half of the library users are indigenous.

Over half of Guatemala's population is rural, indigenous, lives in poverty, and is disproportionately young. Guatemala has the highest illiteracy and school dropout rates in Central America, with rural areas disproportionately affected. It is estimated that more than 30 percent of the people above the age 15 cannot read or write. The Inter-American Development Bank says 54 percent of Guatemalans live in rural areas and 53 percent are under age twenty. More than half are indigenous. According to a 2007 report by the Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas (PREAL), 27 percent of children repeat first grade in Guatemala.

Riecken libraries are located in medium-sized rural towns with an average population of 8,000 residents, with mixed ethnicity between indigenous and non-indigenous populations. However, in surrounding villages, nearly 100% of the populations are indigenous. While Spanish is both the political and popular socio-economic language used in the country, there are 22 Mayan languages spoken as well. In addition to Spanish, four Mayan languages are represented across the 11 communities where Riecken libraries function in Guatemala, including K'iche', Tz'utujil, K'eqchi', and Mam. The Riecken Foundation is currently partnering with the Government of Finland to develop Mayan language children's books in an effort to conserve Mayan language and culture. Every community library contains relevant Mayan language reading material, but there is a lack of published resources in Mayan language.

Method

Signature Programming

In addition to general library services administered by the librarian, there are four signature programs in all the libraries.

1. **Reading Program**¹ – This program seeks to cultivate a love and habit of reading in the communities, and includes story hours, book clubs, and emergent literacy activities, among others.
2. **Youth Leadership Program** – This program seeks to develop the leadership capacity of adolescents (defined by the Riecken Foundation as possessing and demonstrating research skills, critical thinking skills, project execution skills, leadership values, and public speaking skills), and includes leadership values curriculum, community leadership projects, and a public debate training program.
3. **Democracy in Action Program** – This program seeks to promote transparency and the adoption of democratic practices by local institution, including public financial reporting, inter-institutional dialogue, and mayoral forums.

¹ While the Riecken Foundation has comprehensive programming activities for its five program areas, only the Reading Program is detailed in this nomination form.

4. Local Initiative Program – This program seeks to generate local programming that addresses the individual communities’ information needs.
5. Culture and Identity – This new program, made possible through a partnership with the Government of Norway, reinforces the libraries’ role as cultural resource centers that conserve and strengthen the speaking, reading and writing of local languages and practice of traditions. Diverse programming integrates Mayan languages such as Mam, Tz’utujil, Quiché and Keq’chi.

Sparking a Spirit of Discovery through the Reading Program, “Lorito Lector”:

The Foundation’s reading program seeks to cultivate a love and habit of reading in the communities, as well as the skills sets to conduct research and engage learning creatively, fueled by wonder and curiosity. To achieve this objective, a comprehensive reading program with a variety of activities is carried out in every library. “Lorito Lector” provides a stepladder of activities for different ages and reading levels to build motivation for reading amongst children, youth and adults.

Beneficiaries	Activity	Description
Parents with children ages 0-5	Emergent childhood literacy	Twice per month the families meet in the Children’s Corner of the library to participate in activities focusing on six techniques for cognitive and physical development. The activities are designed so that parents can replicate them at home.
Children under 10	Story Hours	The Children’s Corner is a place that children are encouraged to identify as their own space. Dynamic story hours include a pre-story activity or game to break the ice in the group, continued by interactive story telling, and followed up by an activity that links to the story’s themes and encourages reflection on part of the children.
Youth ages 10-13	Book Clubs	Participants submerge themselves in several chapters during the week, returning to the book club to share their impressions and engage in reflective discussion. What is remarkable about these clubs is that they are purely voluntary, not linked to academics, in a society where, according to UNESCO, less than one percent of the population maintains a habit of reading.
Youth and Adults	Dialogues	Upon reading an article or another material, the group engages in lively discussion over different aspects of the content, fomenting critical thinking skills.

Community members of all ages	Selection of new books	Each year every library holds fundraisers to update their book collections. The Foundation provides matching grants and a trip to Guatemala's annual international book fair in the capital (FILGUA) to make their purchases which are based on requests from within their community. Through this participatory process, rural communities are building out their library collections.
Youth and Adults	Literacy	Although the Foundation does not address literacy directly as a programming objective, space is scheduled for youth and adult literacy programs and all the resources in the library are made available to reading groups through a mutual agreement with Guatemala's National Literacy Council (CONALFA).

Results and Evaluations

Public Services in the Libraries

Service	Average number of registered usage per month per Library	Total number of registered usage in 9 Libraries in 2008
Visits for Research and Consultation	1,667	180,036
Computer and Internet Access	495	53,460
Volunteer Service	11.6 Volunteers x 14.6 Hours	18,323 Volunteer Service Hours

Results in Programming

Number of Activities in 2008 in Network of Nine Libraries	Average No. Participants	Children	Youth	Adults	Total
135 Emergent Literacy Activities	15	2,025			3,645
	12			1,620	
900 Story Hours	30	27,000			27,000
521 Book Club Sessions	15	7,815			7,815
327 Youth Group Sessions	15		4,905		4,905
1,125 Local Initiatives (educational & cultural activities)	15		16,875		28,125
	10			11,250	
TOTAL		36,840	21,780	12,870	71,490