

Nicaragua

Skidmore College

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FINAL REPORT

SUMMARY OF PROJECT GOALS

The mobile library project strives toward reducing conflict and fostering peace in rural communities of San Ramón and Matagalpa by enhancing educational opportunities, primarily in the form of access to books and research materials. A team of Nicaraguan scholarship students from collaborating NGO *Sembrando Esperanzas* will travel weekly to each community to provide the opportunity for teachers, parents, and students to utilize textbooks, children's books, and other educational resources; to assist with homework and research; and to facilitate storytelling and book-related activities.

ADDITIONAL FUNDRAISING AND COLLABORATION

Many members of the Saratoga Springs, NY (where Skidmore College is located) and Central Vermont (home base for *Sembrando Esperanzas*) communities donated to the realization of this project. Monetary and in-kind donations totaling over \$1,500 were received from local restaurants, preschools, public libraries, and individuals. In addition, we requested collaboration from the Henniker San Ramón Sister Communities Project to make possible the purchase of a larger, multi-functional vehicle. Henniker San Ramón has pledged \$4,500 toward the bus and is considering further contribution. The possibility also exists that the Arizona Global Giving Circle, which loaned \$1,000 for the construction of a women's weaving cooperative and preschool in the indigenous community of El Chile, (one of the communities served by the mobile library,) may reinvest that capital into the library project to continue educational and economic growth in the area. Substantial, unanticipated contributions also came in the form of hundreds of used book donations from families and individuals in Central San Ramón and La Chispa neighborhoods. A sense of unity and a desire to give, even when one has very little, was demonstrated beautifully during the book donation days.

PROJECT CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES

We initiated the mobile library (*BiblioMovil*) with the understanding that one of the project's greatest strengths lay in its potential to develop and expand over time. We knew that the process of purchasing a vehicle in Nicaragua and providing educational services to diverse communities in multiple locations would be a challenge in such a short period, but that the need was great enough to warrant our best efforts and commitment. Overall, we are very pleased with the accomplishments of the project thus far and look forward to its continued growth over the coming months and years.

The most challenging component was purchasing the vehicle. The paperwork and bureaucratic processes required to obtain tax exemption and complete the purchase as an international NGO seemed to increase in complications weekly, if not daily at times. Because of an irreconcilable issue with the first bus that *Sembrando Esperanzas* attempted to purchase for the *BiblioMovil* in June, Jenna had to dedicate a greater amount of time to the bus search and acquisition process while in Nicaragua than expected. Understanding and facilitating the selection and purchase procedures were also the areas of greatest language and cultural barriers. As a young, American, female whose native language is not Spanish, I had to assert myself, continuing to ask questions until I gathered the information needed to plan the next steps, despite consistent lack of information, disinformation, and occasional disrespect. As mentioned, in order to purchase a larger vehicle that could serve multiple needs of the organization, we also had to secure additional funding.

In the month of July, Jenna traveled to each of the prospective communities with a team of mobile library assistants from *Sembrando Esperanzas* to present the project and explore possible collaboration with area schools. The "BiblioMovil team" includes one young adult staff member, three scholarship students, and two student volunteers who will continue with the project indefinitely. We found these first meetings with teachers, school directors, and parents to be highly successful, exposing substantive need and interest in the majority of the communities. The initial treks by public bus and on foot also allowed us to experience the long hikes many students and teachers must endure to arrive at school each day. In the event that a school was not currently interested in collaborating, we were able to substitute and extend the opportunity to an additional community in need. In the following weeks, we shared stories and books in various ways with the

students in each place. Students of all ages appeared to enjoy reading picture books, as they are uncommon in much of Nicaragua. We also collected basic information and took a photo of each child, teacher, and parent present during the first visits to make library cards. The cards and accompanying information provide documentation and accountability for the BiblioMovil, as well as offered a very exciting experience for the cardholders, akin to a first “school picture day” in the States, perhaps. Most children do not obtain a personal ID card until age 16 or over, so the magnitude associated with maintaining the BiblioMovil card was palpable. Library assistants also began gathering research materials from La Chispa on subject matter requested by the teachers each week.

At this time, the mobile library visits eight communities – composed of five preschools, eight elementary schools, and one community library – on a weekly rotation, spending roughly half a day in each locale. Communities include: Laguna Seca, Ocalca, El Chile, El Tule, Sor María Romero, La Calera, Pueblo Viejo, and La Hermandad. Based on initial matriculation information, the library currently serves over 1,200 students and has the potential to expand to other classes, community members, and schools in the future. The BiblioMovil presently possesses a modest inventory of about 400 children’s books, textbooks, novels, and other resource books. It is also able to borrow underutilized books from Sembrando Esperanzas’ library in La Chispa and from the small satellite library at El Chile’s weaving cooperative. Children’s books were primarily purchased or donated in the U.S., (then economically transported in Jenna’s suitcases), and textbooks in Nicaragua. We are optimistic that the BiblioMovil’s inventory and scope can continue to expand over time through collaboration with Skidmore College, Sembrando Esperanzas brigades, Henniker San Ramón, and other interested groups and individuals.

CONTRIBUTION TO PEACE

Peace, to us, signifies safety, tranquility, and freedom from conflict. To observe a student tenderly turning the pages of a new story in which he or she is fully engrossed or a group of youngsters attentively listening and participating as their teacher reads aloud seems to embody these concepts on a pure, fundamental level. We believe that every moment a child, or any community member, can spend reading or studying in peace is valuable, and that each additional minute dedicated to furthering an individual’s education holds potential for benefiting the greater community. Reading stories that promote values like empathy, sharing, and leadership in an enjoyable, engaging manner may contribute to development of similar traits in their readers. The opportunity to borrow books, even if only for the hours when a mobile library is present, is unfamiliar for many Nicaraguan children, but we hope it will contribute to a greater culture of caring and sharing over time. The chance for teachers to borrow books for the duration of a week is largely unprecedented; we hope this opportunity will enable greater and more consistent educational growth and enjoyment.

Fundamentally, we believe peace develops over the long-term through the reduction of conflict and the creation of opportunities. Expanding and sustaining educational opportunities is a crucial – if not *the* most crucial – component in this process. The mobile library works toward expanding and sustaining educational opportunities by providing textbook use and homework help for students and research assistance and access for teachers. Teacher resources and access to textbooks can significantly augment the quality of education provided. Materials and opportunities that engage students more fully in their studies during class time may enhance their learning, enjoyment, and increase likelihood of school attendance. In addition, providing a safe environment for educational before- and after-school activities may contribute to the reduction of gang-related, unproductive behavior while increasing self-esteem, supporting educational growth, and developing extracurricular skills. We believe every improvement in education holds promise for fostering a desire and capacity for further educational growth and greater occupational opportunities.

The process of developing and implementing such a substantial, meaningful project over a short period taught me an unparalleled amount about the challenges and joys of project development, community organizing, and international aid work. *“Working on this initiative has reinforced my dedication to improving access to education for the world’s youth. Though the project was difficult and discouraging at times, learning from and serving alongside so many inspirational students, teachers, and community members encouraged me for the future and reconfirmed my dedication to pursue a master’s degree and career in international social work with children, youth, and families.”* – Jenna Cameron